

# GLADYS MITCHELL WINKING AT THE BRIM



# Winking at the Brim

*Gladys Mitchell*

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cover



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Gladys Mitchell

WINKING AT THE BRIM

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*Watson's Choice*

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*To*  
*my student nephew*  
**ARNOLD MAURICE DUNCAN SPENCE**  
*with love and best wishes*

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## CHAPTER I

### An Invitation

‘The young lady was most tenderly educated,  
and it is a certain fact that she was never suffered to  
see the moon for fear she should cry for it.’

*James Boswell.*



**L**ike all old-established and old-fashioned households, that of the psychiatric adviser to the Home Office, Dame Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley, was ruled to a great extent by routine. The servants, who knew their place and approved of it, were downstairs by seven in the morning, breakfast was at eight-thirty and, as soon as the postman had called, the secretary picked up the mail and sorted it.

One fine morning in early April, the secretary, whose name was Laura Gavin and who was the friend as well as the confidante of her employer, came down, as usual, before Dame Beatrice or the guest who was staying in the house had appeared, and found the regular collection of letters and bills beside her plate. She began to sort through them while waiting for the others to appear.

She made four piles. One contained Dame Beatrice’s personal correspondence from relatives and friends; the second was Laura’s own mail and the third was addressed to the guest who was staying in the house, Dame Beatrice’s granddaughter Sally Lestrangle. This lively young woman not long down from Oxford was waiting for a flat in London and had been invited to live at the Stone House in Hampshire until the friends with whom she would share had found something suitable. The fourth, and by far the largest pile, consisted of business correspondence, bills and (as Laura put it) anything typed and not hand-written.

Dame Beatrice came down just as Laura had finished opening this last pile, which would be dealt with after breakfast. She served Dame Beatrice from the dishes which had just been brought in, heaped her own plate and then, handing over an elegant piece of gold-printed pasteboard, she observed:

‘“An invitation from the Queen to play croquet”. We don’t know anybody called Calshott, do we?’

‘No, but I do,’ said Sally Lestrangle, coming into the room. ‘I told the Calshotts I was staying here. I had their invitation the day before I came. Phyllis Calshott was one of the seniors in school and I got lugged into visiting them one vac. It’s her birthday on the fourteenth, her twenty-sixth. Hence the dinner-party. We’d better go, if you don’t mind. Sir Humphrey is on the board of some publishers and I’ve written a novel.’

‘They *will* do it, dear boy. They *will* do it!’ murmured Laura, raising her eyes towards the ceiling.

‘Nevertheless, although what you quote is very true,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘perhaps I owe it to Sally to accept the invitation. What kind of people are the Calshotts?’

‘Well, Sir Humphrey is all right,’ said Sally, ‘but Lady Calshott isn’t anybody I’d particularly want to know, and Phyllis is the dreariest kind of drip.’

‘But you are prepared to put up with the mother and daughter in order to ingratiate yourself with the father, are you?’

‘Well, it’s not all that easy to get a novel published nowadays,’ argued Sally, ‘and Phyllis is so utterly spoilt and indulged that, if Sir Humphrey gets the say-so from her and her mother, I think my *opus* is in the bag.’

‘You speak with confidence, I notice. Why is that? Why should mother and daughter support your endeavour to have your book accepted?’

‘Well,’ said Sally, avoiding her aged relative’s sharp black eyes, ‘thereby hangs a tale.’

‘You’re in a position to blackmail this unfortunate family, are you?’ asked Laura, grinning. ‘How is that?’

‘Oh, well, it’s not as shocking as blackmail,’ said Sally, ‘and of course, I’d never dream of putting the screw on in any way whatsoever, but, if I drop a hint to Phyllis that I’ve written a book, she’ll squeal with excitement and go straight to Mummy and tell her that Daddy must, simply *must*, put me into print.’

‘But why?’

‘Well, it seems quite idiotic now, but it all began when I was in the lower fourth at school and she was in the sixth form. First of all I got involved with her over some poetry I’d written. Because her father is in publishing she was made editor of the school magazine. Well, I sent in one or two bits of childish verse and she went all enthusiastic over them and asked whether I’d written any more, because she thought she could get Sir Humphrey to publish it. You can imagine



what that meant to a kid of fourteen, and I must say that Sir Humphrey was very nice to me, although, of course, he didn't publish my poetry, thank goodness. My novel is a different matter.'

'I shall be interested to meet the rash Miss Calshott,' said Dame Beatrice.

'She isn't rash; she's merely goofy,' said Sally.

The small manor house to which Dame Beatrice and Sally had been invited was only forty miles from where they lived, but a warmly-worded note from Lady Calshott, after they had accepted the invitation, begged them to stay the night, as the party was to finish rather late.

When they arrived, Sally was immediately claimed by Phyllis. A fairish, grey-eyed, nondescript kind of young woman with an exaggerated Oxford accent, she had a gushing manner and wore a trouser-suit which was of no help to her narrow, slightly stooping shoulders and disproportionately wide hips. Dame Beatrice, taken in tow by Lady Calshott, was shown up to a pleasant, low-ceilinged room on the first floor and told that Phyllis and Sally would bring her down to tea. At this repast she met her host and was compelled to admit that he was by far the most charming and disarming member of the household.

'Daddy,' said Phyllis, handing him his tea-cup, (she had an embarrassing way of waiting on her parents as though, Sally said later, they had one foot in the grave and she was in trembling expectation that the other foot would soon follow) 'here is your tea, darling, and before you drink even the teeniest drop of it you must promise to publish Sally's book.'

'Oh, has Sally written a book? You know, that's what you could do, Phyllis, dear,' said her mother, 'if you thought you could find the time. If Sally can do it, you can, and it would make a nice change for you, wouldn't it? And, of course, Daddy...'

'Phyllis would need to find another publisher,' said Sir Humphrey hastily. 'We couldn't do it, my dear.'

'Why ever not?' demanded Lady Calshott.

'Kissing mustn't go by favour. I don't want a charge of nepotism levelled against me.'

'Of course I couldn't write a book,' said Phyllis, looking to her mother to contradict her, which Lady Calshott immediately did. 'What kind of book is yours, Sally?'

'A novel, I'm afraid,' replied Sally, glancing at Sir Humphrey.

'Oh, dear!' he said. 'I wish it had been a travel book or a biography. Have you brought it with you?'

‘Oh, no, of course not!’ Sally lied valiantly. ‘But I would like to send it to you if I may. I mean, when I’ve had another go at it, of course.’

‘Oh, no, Sally! You mustn’t touch it,’ cried Phyllis. ‘I’m sure you’ll spoil it if you do. There’s nothing like the first fine careless rapture, is there, Dame Beatrice?’

‘According to Robert Browning, not even for thrushes, perhaps, and certainly not necessarily for authors,’ Dame Beatrice replied.

‘Send it to us by all means, Sally,’ said Sir Humphrey kindly. ‘We can, at any rate, give you an opinion, although I’m not sure that ours is the best firm for you to approach with a first novel. Our list...’

‘Oh, Daddy, of course it is!’ cried Phyllis. ‘You must have more confidence in yourself. Of course yours is the best firm for Sally.’

‘It is not confidence in myself or my firm which I lack, my dear girl,’ said Sir Humphrey. ‘I was merely pointing out...’

‘Daddy, if you don’t publish Sally’s book I shall never speak to you again!’

‘I wonder which of them would be the loser?’ said Dame Beatrice, referring to this passionate declaration later in the day when Sally had gone along to her room to find out whether she was ready to go down to the birthday dinner.

‘She didn’t mean a word of it,’ said Sally. ‘Do you remember calling her “the rash Miss Calshott”? I’m beginning to think you’re right. If you are, she’ll land in trouble one of these days. Nature never intended her to act like a bull at a gate. She’s too spoilt for words, that’s her trouble. I’ll tell you which of the party impresses me even less than Phyllis, though. After all, Phyllis, although goofy to the eyebrows, is well-meaning enough in her irritating way, but that cousin of theirs, the Barton woman we met at tea, is a menace. Spiteful and ill-natured to the core, wouldn’t you say, Grandmamma? She’s a cesspool of slander.’

‘She is all that you claim, I fear. What is more, one may feel sorry for her. Ill-nature makes of her a born victim, don’t you think?’

‘A victim?’

‘Yes, but whether of murder, an unhappy love affair, or merely of some tiresome financial involvement, I could not possibly guess. She talks far too much for her own good, and all of it is spiteful and censorious. Nobody’s guilty secret is safe with a woman like that.’

‘Have you any guilty secrets, Grandmamma?’

‘So many that I have lost count of them,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘How about you?’

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## CHAPTER 2

### Preliminary Soundings

‘... there is that leviathan whom thou hast made  
to play therein.’

*Psalm 104, Authorised Version.*



The conversation, half-serious, half-frivolous, had been carried over from dessert in the dining-room to coffee and liqueurs in the drawing-room. The company, including the host and hostess, numbered fourteen. With Sir Humphrey and Lady Calshott and their daughter Phyllis was the rat-like little woman with the bitter mouth and hostile eyes who had been introduced to the guests as ‘our cousin, Angela Barton, who has come to live with us’.

The guests themselves were Major Tamworth, his wife Catherine and their son Jeremy; a young couple called Nigel and Marjorie Parris, friends of Jeremy’s; an apparently quiet young fellow named Hubert Pring who had been invited because he was week-ending with the Parrises; twin sisters who occupied a cottage on Sir Humphrey’s estate and were dabblers with paint and clay, and, finally, Dame Beatrice herself and Sally.

Of the fourteen people at table, only the twin sisters appeared to be not entirely at ease. Their surname, Dame Beatrice learned, was Benson, and they were rather astoundingly named Godiva and Winfrith. Their father had been an artist—a painter—of some note, but, according to Lady Calshott, had bequeathed little of his talent to his daughters. These, however, enjoyed their dilettante existence and this, perhaps, justified it. They had been added to the gathering fortuitously, having met Lady Calshott in the village that same morning and invited her, rather timidly, to sherry. She excused herself by explaining that she was preparing for guests and saw nothing for it but to reverse the invitation, as she had explained unnecessarily to Dame Beatrice earlier.

‘So, thanks to the Bensons, it will be a monstrous regiment of women,’ she had said to her husband at tea-time after the embarrassing subject of Sally’s novel had been shelved.

‘It doesn’t mean that,’ Sir Humphrey had explained. ‘John Knox meant that women should not rule a country; in his case, it was the country of Mary, Queen of Scots, and it was to her *regiment* that he took exception.’

‘Well, it will throw the table out,’ his wife had angrily retorted. ‘That’s what I mean.’

‘Anyway, they may be interested in my project,’ Sir Humphrey had pacifically observed, ‘and it might be very useful to have a couple of people who can sketch a bit. Sometimes a lightning impression dotted down by an artist has an advantage over a photograph.’

‘Well, I wish I hadn’t had to ask them. They don’t fit in, and, far from stopping to do lightning sketches, the Benson girls are much more likely to scream and run if they *do* see anything in Loch na Tannasg,’ Lady Calshott had said. ‘And why you want to drag Phyllis to such an out of the way spot, where she’ll meet nobody, I cannot think.’

Her reference was to Sir Humphrey’s project which, later that evening, was destined to engage the attention of the entire party.

When the host touched on the subject of monsters in Scottish lochs it was energetically taken up by the company, each of whom had something to say about it. The scoffers, as usual, were in the majority. The only person who did not express an opinion was Dame Beatrice.

‘Well, *I* believe in it,’ said Sally Lestrangle, putting down her empty coffee-cup. ‘Surely all those eye-witnesses can’t be wrong? There have been dozens of sightings on Loch Ness, all of them well-attested.’

‘About thirty, only a year or two ago, on Loch Morar, too,’ said Sir Humphrey, ‘and a whole lot more have been reported from Ireland.’

‘Oh, Ireland!’ exclaimed Major Tamworth, his toothbrush moustache beginning to bristle. ‘Don’t talk to *me* about Ireland! The land of blood and faerie! Banshees, booze and bombs!’

‘A bit sweeping that,’ said Nigel Parris, grinning, ‘isn’t it, sir?’

‘I was out there in Ulster. I ought to know,’ said the major, ‘and a dirty damned show it was, too. Had some success with the women, though. Must admit that!’

‘I believe the sightings were on the west side of the Irish Republic, not in Ulster,’ pursued Nigel, a bearded young man of deceptively apostolic appearance.

‘And there have been reports from Scandinavia,’ said Sally, who wanted to keep the conversation on its original lines.

‘Not to mention North America, I believe,’ said Hubert Pring, backing her up partly because he had conceived a dislike of the major and partly because he liked to prove himself a mine of information.

‘That was the sea-serpent, I thought,’ said Phyllis Calshott. ‘Didn’t you lend me a book by Commander Gould, Daddy? When I read it, I thought, as Huckleberry Finn said of the Bible, that the statements were interesting, but steep. What do *you* think, Sally?’

‘Well, monster or sea-serpent or what have you,’ said Sally, ‘*all* the people who claim to have sighted one or the other can’t be practical jokers or liars. If I had the time and the money I’d organise an expedition myself to Loch Ness or Loch Morar. I don’t see any reason why these creatures shouldn’t exist. They can’t be more extraordinary than dozens of species we take for granted. What about whales and swordfish? What about the dugong and the manatee? Why, nobody believed the coelacanth still existed until somebody dredged one up around the coast of Madagascar, and since then several have been found, so they must still be breeding after, perhaps, millions of years. As for monsters, what could be more monstrous than the giant squid or the Komodo dragon? And anybody who can believe in the rhinoceros and the giraffe can believe anything. Who, for the matter of that, would believe in an alligator or a thirty-foot anaconda if the things hadn’t been seen and photographed?’

‘You are eloquent, Miss Lestrangle,’ said Angela Barton acidly. ‘You have the gift of tongues.’

‘You’re confusing me with the day of Pentecost,’ retorted Sally. ‘Still, perhaps I *had* rather collared the centre of the stage. I apologise, but I don’t retract my assertions.’

‘Good for you, Sally!’ said Phyllis, giving her a look of sycophantic admiration. ‘Sally, you all ought to know,’ she went on, addressing, to Sally’s horror, the table at large, ‘has written a most wonderful novel, and Daddy is going to publish it for her, aren’t you, Daddy dear?’

‘Well, I hope so, I’m sure, but I haven’t seen it yet,’ Sir Humphrey replied.

‘And is it about the Loch Ness monster?’ asked Nigel’s wife Marjorie, a flirtatious and obtuse young woman whom the company, so far, had ignored. ‘I shouldn’t think that would make a very good subject for a novel, would it?’

‘No, it wouldn’t, and, of course, I’m sure Sally’s novel isn’t about anything of the sort,’ said Phyllis. ‘Tell us what it’s about, Sally, do.’

Sally, who could have killed her, smiled and said, ‘Oh, let’s go on talking about the monster. I was just getting thoroughly interested.’

Sir Humphrey came to her rescue. So far, after having launched the discussion, he had taken little part in it. Now he leaned forward in his armchair.

‘As a matter of fact, I myself was a member of the Loch Ness Investigation Bureau a few years ago,’ he said. ‘We were sponsored at the time by the Field Enterprises Education Corporation of Chicago. They were obliged to withdraw their support later—financial reasons, no doubt—but while they were with us their contributions were most generous, both in money and expertise.’

‘Chicago?’ said Jeremy Tamworth. ‘I would have thought Boston more likely. Culture, and all that, what?’

‘Chicago is richer, perhaps,’ said Phyllis Calshott. ‘Go on, Daddy. Tell them what you intend.’

‘What *do* you intend, sir?’ asked Jeremy. ‘Not a monster-hunt, by any chance? If so, please count me in.’ He caught Marjorie Parris’s eye. She giggled and Lady Calshott scowled.

‘Well,’ said Sir Humphrey, ‘it’s like this. When I was attached to the Loch Ness party I did not have the good fortune to see or photograph anything out of the ordinary, and yet, only a week or two ago, I heard a strange story which aroused my curiosity. It dates back to last September, but I only got hold of it when we went to visit my brother who takes a small place on the west coast of Scotland most summers. The story bears all the marks of authenticity, since it came from my young nephew and a friend of his, and they would not attempt, I think, to lead me up the garden or lie to me.

‘The boys had their frightening experience near my brother’s holiday cottage on a small piece of water called Loch na Tannasg. The nearby village is known as Tannasgan and the loch is only a mile or so away. Tannasgan is at the mouth of a short, swift river which flows into the sea by way of a big sea-loch called Loch Geall.’

‘And the boys?’ asked Marjorie Parris.

‘As usual—it was near the end of their holiday—they had taken a boat out on Loch na Tannasg to go fishing. There are salmon in the loch as well as trout. Last summer very little rain came down from the mountains, so the upper stream, where it falls into the loch, was very low, and it’s probable that the salmon couldn’t get up to their spawning grounds and were obliged to remain in the loch.’

‘Providing plenty of food for the poor old monster,’ said Phyllis.

‘Bless its heart,’ said Jeremy, who detested Phyllis but was obliged to be more or less civil to her, since their families were near neighbours.

‘Oh, don’t tease me, Jeremy,’ said Phyllis, pouting. ‘I only meant—’

‘Let your father finish, darling,’ said Lady Calshott.

‘I think I *have* finished,’ said her husband.

‘You mean you think the monsters feed on the fish?’ asked Sally.

‘Well, if the composition of the loch is similar to that of Loch Ness, they must do so in order to survive. There would not be nearly enough vegetable matter or plankton in the water to support creatures of any size, so the inference is that the monsters are carnivores.’

‘But what was that about the boys? You still haven’t told us,’ said Marjorie Parris.

‘Oh, simply that they claim to have had a sighting,’ said Phyllis.

‘Of the monster, do you mean?’

‘Of *a* monster,’ said Sir Humphrey. ‘It stands to reason that, if there is one, there must be more than one. Like all other creatures, if they exist the monsters must perpetuate their species by breeding.’

‘Are they called monsters because of their size or because of their natures, do you suppose?’ asked Nigel Parris, not altogether seriously.

‘I suppose, as they have never been scientifically investigated and as some accounts give the impression that they are frightening, some name had to be attached to them, and ‘monster’ has a grim and terrifying sound which, no doubt, causes the same kind of shuddering delight as that which affects the listeners to a ghost story,’ said Hubert Pring pedantically.

‘But tell us about the *boys*,’ persisted Marjorie. ‘What age are they?’

‘Oh, schoolboys, you know, of about fifteen,’ replied Sir Humphrey.

‘Oh!’ said Marjorie, obviously disappointed.

‘*Boys!*’ ejaculated Major Tamworth. ‘All boys are jackanapes! Savages! Practical jokers! Young hooligans! If I get in at the next election—I’ve been nominated, don’t yer know—I shall bring in a bill to re-introduce birching. Sensible chaps, those Manxmen! That’ll teach the young devils to behave themselves. These young limbs of yours, Humphrey, were having you on, and you can take my word for it. *Must* have been having you on.’

‘Possibly,’ agreed the grey-haired man, with equanimity. ‘Very possibly, my dear Major. All the same, boys, beloved of the gods but, as you say, quite often cursed by everybody else, often do have strange experiences and stumble upon strange truths. Take the Infant Samuel, for example.’

‘What about him? You mean the chap in the Bible?’ asked the major, looking sceptical.

‘His mother dedicated him (as a thank-offering) to the temple at Shiloh. The result was that he ruined three lives and ended up by anointing two kings and appearing as a disembodied spirit to one of them,’ said Hubert Pring.

‘Legend!’ snorted the major. ‘Nothing but legend! You’ll be telling us next that you’ve seen Venus rising from the waves. Lucky devil, if you have!’

‘Very well,’ said Sir Humphrey. ‘Then how about the five French boys at Montignac?’

‘What five boys?’

‘Why,’ said Sally, breaking in before her host could answer, ‘Sir Humphrey means the boys who discovered the wall-paintings in the caves of Lascaux.’

‘Oh, those prehistoric things!’ said the major contemptuously. ‘I don’t see how *that* proves his point.’

‘Then you don’t know the whole story,’ said Sir Humphrey. ‘What happened was that these boys, who lived in unoccupied France during the war—one, I believe, was actually a refugee from the north—were out on a country ramble with their dog. Upon missing the dog, they searched for him and one of them, stumbling through bushes when he heard the dog barking, found the entrance to the caves and was the first person (at any rate for thousands of years) to gaze upon those extraordinary representations of aurochs, cows, deer, ponies and bird-men which Aurignacian magicians had painted or engraved upon the walls.’

‘The caves were primitive temples, then,’ said Godiva Benson, ‘and the magicians, I suppose, were their priests.’ She looked pleased with this sapient but trite observation.

‘How I’d *love* to go and see the paintings!’ said her sister.

‘I believe the authorities have closed the caves to the public,’ said Hubert Pring. ‘The air, or the damp or something, was getting at the paintings and ruining them. But some friends of mine went while the caves were still open and were rushed through so fast by the guide that they saw almost nothing. It was hardly worth the trouble of going there, they said.’

‘Well, at any rate, those boys made a wonderful discovery,’ said Sir Humphrey, ‘quite as wonderful, in its way, as anything Schliemann found at Mycenae or Evans in Crete. What’s more...’

‘Oh, damn all boys!’ exclaimed the major. ‘If it hadn’t been for the lad James Watt sitting watching his mother’s kettle come to the boil instead of getting up and doing something useful, we might not have had to put up with British Rail and all that *that* stands for!’

‘There *was* the boy who became the seventh Lord Shaftesbury,’ began



Winfrith Benson. 'He saw a pauper's funeral and it horrified him so much that...'

'Oh, these nineteenth century reformers!' snorted Major Tamworth. 'The Victorians were the biggest hypocrites on earth!'

'We're talking about boys,' said his son, winking at Marjorie Parris.

'What about Mozart sitting at the piano at dead of night in his little reach-me-downs!' said Marjorie, giggling.

'It was his night-shirt,' said the pedantic Hubert Pring. ('His name ought to be Prig, not Pring,' said Sally to Dame Beatrice, later.)

'What about boys in myth and legend?' asked Dame Beatrice.

'Like the Spartan boy and the fox?' said Phyllis Calshott.

'I was thinking of the boy Thialfi, who, merely by breaking a tiny meat-bone and sucking out the marrow, was taken to the land of the giants and ran a race against the giant Time and almost defeated him. What would have happened, I wonder, had he won the race?'

'The race against time? We still use that expression. Is that where it comes from?' asked Lady Calshott. 'Phyllis, darling, you would know.'

'None of you has mentioned the most mischievous boy of all,' said Sally. 'Not that he's ever come *my* way, thank goodness!'

'Puck, do you mean?' asked Nigel Parris.

'No, although Puck mentions him in "the Dream". I mean Eros. Remember? *Cupid is a knavish lad Thus to make poor females mad.*'

'Well, I'm glad we've come round to females,' said Marjorie Parris. 'I was afraid they weren't going to get a look-in at all.'

'Oh, girls get none of the limelight nowadays, and never *have* had it,' said Angela Barton, with her sour smile. 'I could tell you...'

'Oh, *girls!*' exclaimed Jeremy Tamworth. 'They *do* make news, of course. They can form a bone of contention between their legitimate but divorced parents; they can let all hell loose between their real mothers and their foster-mothers; they can become Miss World if their vital statistics are in the right place and the right order and they can accept lifts in the cars of total strangers and get themselves raped and murdered. That's girls for you, Miss Barton.'

'I vote we stick to boys,' said Hubert Pring. 'As a prep. school master, I find that one boy on his own is a perfectly reasonable creature; that two boys together, provided they have a common interest, are still capable of civilised behaviour; but get three or more boys in close association and you have that which makes for treasons, stratagems and spoils—in other words, you have a

gang. Mob rule replaces the individual conscience, and the law of the jungle takes over from reason and commonsense. This was well understood by the author of *Lord of the Flies*.'

'We seem to have got a pretty long way from the original subject,' said Sally. 'Why have we shelved the Loch Ness monster?'

'Yes, Sir Humphrey, you *still* haven't told us exactly what happened to those boys of yours and what they saw,' said Marjorie.

'What happened was that they went fishing and thought their boat was going to be turned over. What they saw—and they're convinced of this—was the head, neck and two humps of a creature which bore a marked similarity to the popular description of the Loch Ness monster,' said Sir Humphrey. 'Well, I was so much impressed by the story that I am taking a sabbatical of a sort this summer. While I am on leave from the office I propose to organise an expedition to Tannasgan and I invite any of you who would be interested to join me up there. I shall be on leave for the months of July and August, and should welcome those who could spare a fortnight or more, and particularly anybody enthusiastic enough to put in the whole of the two months or even one of them, to help in the work of keeping watch.'

'How long can you give us to make up our minds?' asked Hubert Pring. 'I'd like to come, I think.'

'I shall need definite acceptances by the end of May,' said Sir Humphrey.

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## CHAPTER 3

### The Volunteer

‘Joining themselves in fatal harmony.’

*Andrew Marvell.*



Sally was not an early riser. Phyllis had gone out riding with Jeremy Tamworth, whose family lived at the other end of the village, Lady Calshott was conducting Dame Beatrice round the garden, and nobody was at the breakfast table except her host when Sally put in an appearance. Sir Humphrey had finished his breakfast and was reading the newspaper. He laid it down when she entered.

‘Help yourself,’ he said, having greeted her. ‘Want me to stay with you while you feed?’

‘Yes, if you’ll talk to me,’ said Sally. ‘I’ve been thinking over what was said last night about this business of going to look for monsters in Loch na Tannasg.’

‘Oh, yes? I’m glad you’re interested. Any chance that you and Dame Beatrice might join us?’

‘I really don’t know. You do believe that report you were given, I suppose?’

‘The sighting? Well, I’ve had several talks with the two boys and they seemed very certain of their facts. I spoke to them separately, and their stories tallied in every particular that matters.’

‘And which particulars are those, would you say?’

‘The *locale*, the boat-trip, the time of day, the surface of the loch, the general appearance of the monster, the kind of wash it created...’

‘And where did their stories *not* agree?’

‘About the distance they were from the shore and about the size of the creature.’

‘Were the discrepancies significant?’

‘I did not think so. It is difficult for the inexperienced to estimate distance from a boat which is low in the water, and their views as to the length overall of the monster were almost bound to be somewhat vague, since at no time, of

course, did they see its entire body. One boy estimated its length as being about thirty feet, the other boy thought it might be nearer fifty.'

'Both estimates could have been wildly exaggerated, I suppose?'

'Oh, of course they could. The boys admit to having been badly frightened at the time, and that might well cause them to exaggerate.'

'How big is the loch? You said it was smaller than Loch Ness.'

'Tannasg is about eight miles long. I've never been there, but I've studied it on the map and it appears to be about a mile and a half wide at its broadest part, and less than half a mile across at its narrowest. It has an estimated depth of eight hundred feet, but, as we know, some of these Scottish lochs have anything but a flat bed, so it is possible that there are holes at which the depth could be nine hundred feet or more. I did not get these measurements from the boys, of course. I have looked them up for myself and they bear comparison with the estimated depths of Ness and Morar.'

'How much did the boys know about the Loch Ness monster before they went boating on Tannasg?'

'Well, of course, they had bought picture postcards of the 1934 photograph.'

'That's the one which shows the head and neck?'

'That's the one. Most people are familiar with it, I suppose. There's been some controversy about the photograph, but I'm sure it's genuine. They have also seen the picture taken in 1951 by a Mr Stewart, who worked for the Forestry Commission in the Loch Ness area. That, of course, shows only the three humps which other watchers have described.'

'So the boys were already firmly convinced of the existence of these creatures before they ever went to Tannasgan, I imagine.'

'They told me that, until they had their frightening experience, they had regarded all the tales about the Loch Ness monster as mythical and thought the monster itself was nothing other than a joke. However, they were quietly fishing off-shore when, first of all, a long wash rocked their boat quite dangerously, and then a snake-like head with a large, pale eye emerged. The head was on the end of a six-foot neck and was followed by two blackish humps. The creature, which, according to the boys, had been spreading its wake down the middle of the loch, then appeared to change direction and to make directly for the boat. One boy shouted and yelled. The other beat the water with an oar. Upon this, the creature submerged itself vertically and completely disappeared, but they could still see its wake as it made for the sea-end of the loch where all but one of the islands are.'

‘Did they ever see it again?’

‘No. They kept watch from a vantage point on the shore, not feeling equal to going out in the boat again, but their holidays were nearly up and they saw nothing more of the creature.’

‘Did they tell their parents what they had seen?’

‘Not immediately. Like a good many other people who have been convinced they have had a sighting, they were afraid their story would not be believed. When, however, they refused an invitation from my brother to take them fishing again, they confessed to their fears and, to their relief, I imagine, were believed. My brother told me the story in a letter, as he knew I had been a member of the Loch Ness investigation, so I went along to his place to question the boys for myself, and I am convinced that they are telling the truth.’

‘Lucky lads,’ said Sally. ‘What wouldn’t I give to see the monster!’

‘My dear girl, why not join us, then? My daughter would be delighted and my wife and I, too.’

‘Well,’ said Sally, flinching mentally at the thought of Phyllis’s delight, ‘it’s very kind of you. Isn’t a great deal of equipment necessary, though?’

‘I am prepared to see about all that.’

‘I’ve read various books, of course, which intrigued me,’ said Sally.

‘Tim Dinsdale’s?’

‘Yes, and *The Search for Morag*.’

‘Elizabeth Montgomery Campbell, with David Solomon. What did you think when you read the books?’

‘That the evidence for the existence of these creatures is indisputable.’

‘My dear Sally, you are an ally—pity it doesn’t rhyme! — after my own heart. The witnesses...’

‘Constance Whyte!’

‘P. A. MacNab!’

‘H. L. Cockrell!’

‘Peter O’Connor!’

‘Lachlan Stuart!’

‘Dick Raynor—he saw only the wake of a moving object, it’s true, but it couldn’t have been made by a boat.’

‘Oh, yes, the evidence is overwhelming, and I’d love to collect some of it for myself. What an experience it would be, wouldn’t it? Tell me about the equipment we shall need, please.’

‘If you’ve read the books, you’ll know. We can’t manage a midget submarine

or a helicopter, and I don't think underwater photography will be possible, or the use of sonar, so I propose to rely upon long-range photography from the shore. We can shoot film if the opportunity arises and I shall provide binoculars and there will be cameras to take "stills". I don't know how many watchers I can muster, but it would be delightful to have you with us. Some of the others are not too serious, I'm afraid, and that includes my own wife and daughter.'

Sally laughed and said, 'I'll see what my grandmother has to say. There's time to think it over, isn't there?'

'Oh, certainly. Six weeks to make up your mind.'

'I shan't need so long as that.'

On the return journey to Stone House, Sally said to Dame Beatrice, 'What do you think of this Loch na Tannasg thing?'

'I think you would like to join the expedition.'

'Yes, but I don't want to leave you while Laura is away. When do you think she'd like to go on holiday?'

'That's neither here nor there, child. It would suit me very well to spend the summer in a round of visits which I have already put off paying for far too long, and if I knew that you were away and enjoying yourself it would relieve my feelings, I assure you.'

'I think I'll go, then. Wonder who else will join up?'

'Possibly all those who were present at the feast.'

'You don't really think so, do you? Most of them seemed to scoff. I should have thought very few of them were there to pray. Apart from Sir Humphrey and myself, I had the impression that there were scarcely any serious thinkers among our little gathering.'

'True, and yet my own impression was that ears were pricked and becks and nods and wreathed smiles exchanged when Sir Humphrey issued his invitation.'

'Nobody except Hubert Pring actually *said* anything, though. How I do dislike that young man!'

'He bears the marks of his calling a little too obviously, perhaps.'

'A prep. school master, yes, and what a stuffed shirt, at that! What did you make of the Tamworths? The major struck me as Colonel Blimp in person.'

'With more than a touch of Captain Bligh, I think, and a faint suspicion of Casanova, perhaps.'

'I'd hate to be his wife, anyway, but I don't believe he has much control over young Jeremy.'

'Bullies seem to recognise instinctively those who will give way to them and

those who will not. I think Jeremy and his father joined battle a long time ago and the youth won. Possibly his brains are better than his father's.'

'What about the spinster twins?'

'They were background figures at the dinner and hardly showed up as brilliant conversationalists afterwards, but I think Godiva may have a stronger character than she indicated last night. The most interesting personality, though, was undoubtedly the unlovable Miss Angela Barton. I wonder what induced the Calshotts to have her to reside with them? Lady Calshott, whose cousin she is, hardly appeared to be the sort of person to encourage a poor relation.'

'You're right enough there, Grandmamma. Cousin Angela is very comfortably off. Phyllis told me so and is determined to ingratiate herself with the sourpuss if she doesn't murder her first.'

'Surely Miss Calshott did not mention murder?'

'Oh, didn't she, though! She also said that if an epidemic of poison-pen ever broke out in the village, she'd know exactly where to look, so what do you make of that?'

'I should assume that she had acquired a mild dislike of her mother's cousin,' said Dame Beatrice equably. 'However, we will hope that Miss Barton's affairs may remain no concern of ours.'

'Famous last words!' said Sally sardonically, but with far more truth than she could realise.

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## CHAPTER 4

### Reconnaissance

‘Behold her, single in the field...’

*William Wordsworth.*



(1)

At the end of May Sally, who was still at the Stone House, received a letter from Sir Humphrey to ask whether she was still prepared to join the Loch na Tannasg expedition. He enquired if Dame Beatrice would not reconsider her decision to spend July and August with relatives, and add herself instead to the rest of the party which was to foregather at the Tannasgan Hotel on Thursday, 2 July, at some time in the afternoon.

‘There,’ the letter continued, ‘we will have a gala dinner, spend the Thursday night at the hotel and begin our project after breakfast on the Friday morning.’

‘I don’t like the idea of beginning anything on a Friday,’ muttered Sally, as she handed over the letter for Dame Beatrice to read. ‘I suppose you *won’t* think of changing your mind and coming with us? You haven’t fixed up your round of visits yet.’

‘Oh, there is plenty of time for that. By the way, I think a small piece of paper came out of the envelope when you extracted the letter. It has fallen on to the floor. No, I shall not change my mind. You will get on better without me, I think.’

Sally retrieved the half-sheet, read what was on it and groaned theatrically. ‘Bad news?’ Dame Beatrice enquired.

‘Oh, *Lord!* What *have* I let myself in for!’ Sally exclaimed. The half-sheet was in typescript and was headed *Caravan Arrangements*. The ‘arrangements’ were in neat columns, four of them in all. Sally passed the flimsy half-sheet to her grandmother, who studied it gravely before handing it over to Laura.

‘I see nothing extraordinary about the arrangements,’ she said. ‘Due consideration appears to have been given to the convenience of the married, and



a nice adjustment for the segregation of the sexes appears to have been most carefully made in the other cases. What, Laura, is your opinion of the document?’

‘Not being acquainted with the parties, I can’t say,’ said Laura. ‘All appears to be in order, and is fairly stated, as you claim. What’s your trouble, Sally?’

‘Share a space about eight feet square with that frightful Barton woman? Over my dead body!’ exclaimed Sally. ‘I’d sooner have Hubert Pring as a shipmate! I say, can I duck out of it after all, do you suppose, or am I irrevocably committed, as they say?’

‘I’d duck out,’ said Laura, ‘if you feel like that, although I don’t know the woman.’

‘Well,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘from what I remember of the party in question, I begin to understand Sally’s dismay.’

‘Thirteen is a damned unlucky number, anyway, Sally,’ said Laura thoughtfully. ‘The rest of them might be rather relieved and pleased if you *did* opt out, don’t you think?’

‘I think it would be a pity if Sally missed the opportunity of seeing a denizen of the deep rise from its prehistoric habitat,’ said Dame Beatrice solemnly.

‘Yes, I know,’ assented Sally gloomily. ‘Don’t suppose I’ll ever get such a promising chance again. But, O Lord, preserve me from Angela Barton!’

‘I remember occasions,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘on which you have pointed out to me how much money Laura and I could save on our not infrequent journeys if we travelled in a motorised caravan like your own Ford Transit vehicle, cooked our own breakfasts and used hotels only for lunches and dinners. Why do you not suggest to Sir Humphrey that you play the lone wolf in your van?’

‘Yes,’ said Laura, ‘what about it, Sally? Save you no end of bother. After all, you’ve got the van. There’s every excuse to use it.’

‘By doing so,’ Dame Beatrice pointed out, ‘you could be a free agent, a kind of liaison officer, up at Tannasgan. You would be independent and also mobile, both of which you would enjoy. This plan would also go far to resolve your other small problem, for the party, instead of numbering thirteen, could be regarded as being composed of twelve plus one.’

‘It’s a marvellous idea,’ said Sally, slowly. ‘I’d like it above all things. How would I put it to Sir H., though, that I want to go it alone? The van sleeps two, you know.’

‘Anticipate any arguments, of course. Tell him that you already have the motorised caravan and would like to use it, but that it will sleep only one person

in comfort,' suggested Laura. 'You could add, in your tactful way, that, by the means which you suggest, he would need to hire only three static caravans instead of the four he mentions in his letter.'

'That's an idea,' said Sally, gratefully. 'I don't see what objection there could be to my using my own van, and, if it will save expense, that's a factor which ought to count. Will you help me compose the letter, Laura?'

'Love to. I rather fancy myself as a wielder of the pen. Let's go to it as soon as breakfast is over, shall we?'

A fortnight later Sally received a friendly letter from Sir Humphrey in which he indicated that to have one completely mobile member of his team would be of undoubted help.

'It won't affect you personally,' he finished up, 'but you may like to see the amended list which I enclose.' A typewritten half-sheet supplied the information to which he referred. It read:

*Caravan A*

Sir H. Calshott

Lady Calshott

Phyllis Calshott

Angela Barton

*Caravan B*

Major Tamworth

Mrs Tamworth

Godiva Benson

Winfrith Benson

*Caravan C*

Nigel Parris

Marjorie Parris

Jeremy Tamworth

Hubert Pring

'Fair enough,' commented Sally. 'After all, it's up to the Calshotts to look after Angela Barton. Don't know how the major will like teaming up with those rather gosh-awful sisters, but he won't see much of them except at breakfast and supper, I suppose, and perhaps not even then. I also fancy that Jeremy Tamworth may not think much of sharing with Hubert Pring, but I don't suppose he wanted to be in his parents' caravan, anyway.'

'Yes, that's very true,' said Laura. 'Children do seem to bar having anything to do with their parents nowadays.'

There had been a tentative suggestion that Sir Humphrey's party should meet in London and travel to Tannasgan by motor-coach chartered for the occasion, but there were various objectors to this plan and it was abandoned.

Sally, in any case, was not included, since she intended to drive her motorised caravan to the hotel. She had also elected to set out a whole week before the appointed time in order to accept a long-standing invitation to spend a day or two with friends in Inverness. She planned to spend two nights on the road, spend another three with her friends, and then get to Tannasgan with time to spare before the rest of the party arrived. She proposed to conduct her first survey of the *locale* in a leisurely manner and alone.

Dame Beatrice and Laura saw her off, waited until a bend in the road through that part of the New Forest hid the motorised caravan from their sight, and returned to the interior of the Stone House.

'Well!' said Laura. 'And now to spend the next week or two as I really want to! I shall stay here, and roam the forest wild.'

'And I,' said Dame Beatrice, 'for the present.'

'Yes, you haven't made out that round of visits yet.'

'Visits,' said Dame Beatrice, 'especially to relatives, are far better confined to the winter months, when one is allowed to stay indoors beside the fire.'

'You mean you don't intend to pay these visits after all?'

'I do not care for picnics, tennis parties, the local flower show and village fête, church on Sunday mornings and watching village cricket on Sunday afternoons.'

Laura grinned.

'And what is your real reason for not going away from here?' she asked.

'The trouble about living with people is that they become able to read your mind,' complained Dame Beatrice. 'Why will my list of valid excuses not satisfy you?'

'Because there is something else. For some reason you want to keep in close touch with young Sally, and you think that if you're emulating a snipe and flitting from one country house to another, you may not be on hand in her hour of need. What's wrong with these people who are going to sort out the loch monster?'

'Nothing, so far as I know. The point is that I cannot fathom why most of them are going. I can understand the Calshotts and, I suppose, Miss Barton, as

she is related to them, but why the Tamworths and the Parris couple? Why the sisters Benson? When Sally and I were at the dinner-party, more than half Sir Humphrey's guests scoffed openly at the idea that there were these monstrous creatures in Scottish lochs. Why, therefore, are they prepared to spend time looking for them?'

'To get a cheap holiday,' said the practical Laura. 'I except Sally, of course. As for the others, they know that not only the Lord, but the baronet, will provide.'

### (3)

Sally enjoyed the long journey to Inverness and the short stay with her friends there. Having left them soon after lunch in order to arrive in Tannasgan in time for dinner, she was soon making the slight detour to cross Glen Urquhart on her way to Fort William. Thereafter she was forced to rely upon maps. She studied these in a hotel lounge after lunch, but the roads were comparatively few in that part of the country, so that she had little fear of losing her way. In good time for a bath and a change of clothes before dinner, she drove into the yard of the hotel at Tannasgan and checked in at the desk, the only visitor until the others arrived a day or so later.

Her room was already reserved. After dinner the evening was still quite light enough to encourage her to take a short stroll around the village. It was quite small, and the hotel itself was nothing more than an inn which catered for a few holiday visitors and was the local pub for the shepherds and fishermen. The houses and cottages were either spread along the shores of the sea-loch into which, after leaving Loch na Tannasg, the tumbling river ran, or else were huddled beneath the neighbouring hillside.

Next morning, after an early breakfast, Sally drove off and obtained her first sight of the loch itself. It was, she thought, a very beautiful but sinister-looking piece of water, overshadowed on the north by mountains and on the south by almost equally formidable hills. On the side from which she approached it by way of a narrow stone bridge over the river, there were a number of small islands, two of them wooded, the others not more than large rocks.

There were tracks on both sides of the loch wide enough to take her van, but, although she tried each of them—and in one place, had to back for more than half-a-mile before she could manage to turn—she found that it was impossible to drive all the way round the loch. Both tracks petered out in the most uncompromising fashion. The one on the north shore ended after the first four

miles. The track along the south bank was rougher, but went further. All the same, about a mile from the head of the loch, so far as she could judge, a belt of pines formed a barrier which could only be passed on foot.

Here the loch had its narrowest point. Sally got out, took her field-glasses and looked across to the opposite shore. Here there was an uninviting, desolate, boulder-strewn stretch which seemed to run from the mountain scree almost to the head of the loch.

There was something more. On rising ground behind the dun-coloured beach was what seemed to be an empty house, a hunting-lodge of sorts, Sally assumed. There were no signs of life in the dwelling, and its windows returned to her gaze a blank, impersonal stare. To the right of it, but higher up and some distance away—a distance Sally found hard to judge—were the ruins of a crofter's cottage.

She stepped back to the van, locked it—a reflex action performed merely from urban habit—and walked into the wood of pines. There was a path of sorts which led down to the water's edge. Pulled up on the sandy shore of what might be called a tiny creek, there was a boat. It was roomy and heavy, the kind of craft which fishermen might use on inland waters. The oars were there, and the planking seemed sound enough. Sally wondered whether Sir Humphrey had hired it to transport his watchers to the opposite shore, since that could be reached, it seemed, in no other way from that end of the loch. She gave the boat a shove, but it was too heavy for her to launch and it remained firmly fixed in the soft damp sand brought down at some time by the river.

There was something else to see, apart from the boat. This was a wooded island. At first, Sally thought she could see a ruined castle on it. Closer inspection, however, corrected this impression. The oddments of tumbled stone walls, now overgrown and uninterpretable, could be, she thought, the remains of early monastic buildings.

Sally returned to the hotel and, as she changed her shoes, suddenly realised that, in exploring the loch's silent shores, she had given no thought whatever to the monster.

'Still, I'd have noticed it soon enough if it had surfaced,' she thought. It occurred to her that if Sir Humphrey's young relative and his companion had had a sighting, there must be others in the neighbourhood who had had the same experience. That was, if the boys had been telling the truth. She decided there and then to make what attempt she could to get their story confirmed before the rest of her party arrived.

She began her attempt after lunch that day, realising, too late, that if she had come to Tannasgan directly, instead of visiting Inverness, she might have had a longer time for questioning the villagers. She began with the innkeeper's wife and was greeted with peals of laughter.

‘Monsters in the loch! Mere hawering!’

‘Sir Humphrey doesn’t think so.’

‘Does he no? Och, weel, ilka mon to his taste.’

‘But there *have* been sightings on Loch na Tannasg, haven’t there?’

‘No tae my knowledge, but, then, I’m frae Glesca, ye ken, and we’re too lacking in imagination in Glesca, I’ll be thinking, tae be fashin’ oorselves aboot monsters.’

‘But, Mrs McLauchlin, you must have heard rumours. I mean, living in the hotel as you do, you must have had people here who mentioned seeing the monster, or of knowing somebody who said he had seen it.’

‘Och, some of them wad say anything when they’ve had a dram or two. Monsters, pink elephants, giant spiders climbing down the wa’, or whatever ither sic daft ferlies wad come intae their fou heids.’

‘But you don’t remember anybody who said definitely— somebody who wasn’t drunk, but who was, perhaps, only frightened or awe-stricken...?’

‘Awa wi’ ye!’ exclaimed Mrs McLauchlin. ‘Naebody wha wisna drunk wad be seeing monsters in Loch na Tannasg! Monsters, indeed!’ She retired, still laughing.

Somewhat deflated, Sally thought she would try her luck in the village. The difficulty was to know how and where to begin. She had a fair share of nerve, but it took more than she could muster to begin knocking on doors at random to ask whether the inmates had seen or heard of a monster. She wandered around for a bit and then made her way to the sea-shore. It might be easier to ask somebody down there in the open than to go knocking on doors, she thought.

There was a solitary figure standing near some flattish, seaweed-covered rocks. Sally walked towards him. His back was towards her as she began to approach, but as soon as he heard her above the sound of the waves he turned round and she saw to her great surprise that it was Jeremy Tamworth.

‘Oh, dear!’ she said. ‘It’s no good asking *you*!’

‘Asking me what? And what are you doing here? The party doesn’t start until tomorrow.’

‘Come to that, what are *you* doing here before it starts?’ demanded Sally.

‘Oh, I’ve been here a week or more. My old man sent me on ahead to find

out whether there's anything in this yarn about the monster or whether we'll be wasting our holiday. I'm staying at one of the cottages. It's empty, so I rented it.'

'And is there anything in the story? Up at the hotel they say there isn't.'

'They're wrong, then. I've sent my old man a wire. There have been lots of sightings; three this summer already. So cheer up and get your camera-finger clicking.'

'Are you pulling my leg?' demanded Sally.

'No, no, honest I'm not! Ask anybody you like. Your people up at the hotel must be deaf or daft. Who did you speak to about it?'

'Mrs McLauchlin, the landlord's wife.'

'And she hadn't heard the stories?'

'Well, she said the people who told them must have been drunk.'

'Oh, well,' said Jeremy, 'she might be right, at that. Come on back there with me. I've met her. She's a genial, matey soul. I'll buy you a drink and we'll sort her, as they say in her home town. Incidentally, have they told you that the fair Phyllis won't be joining us for a day or two?'

'It won't affect me, as it happens,' said Sally. 'I'm playing lone wolf on this trip.'

'Oh, really? How do you mean?'

Sally explained about her motorised van.

'Lucky old you!' said Jeremy. 'Well, come on. Let's pull Mrs McLauchlin's ample leg.'

The subsequent conversation, however, convinced Sally that if there *was* a monster in Loch na Tannasg, the landlord's wife was not admitting to any knowledge of it.

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## CHAPTER 5

### The Gathering

‘Looked at each other with a wild surmise...’

*John Keats.*



(1)

Sally strolled down to the beach on the following morning, but there was no sign of Jeremy, neither did she meet him when she wandered through the village. She no longer had any desire to waylay people and ask questions about the monster. It seemed strange, she thought, that Jeremy should have received assurances of sightings, whereas Mrs McLauchlin had denied that there had ever been anything of the kind.

Moreover, given the choice, Sally felt that she would place more confidence in the denials than in the assertions. Mrs McLauchlin carried conviction; Jeremy, who struck Sally as an unreliable young man, did not. She was not of an age to be too serious-minded herself, but her father was Sir Ferdinand Lestrangle, Q.C., and she had inherited, or perhaps had learned from him, the ability to assess character as well as to sift evidence.

Her thoughts carried her farther. Major Tamworth must have committed himself, his wife and his son to the expedition long since. Why, therefore, wondered Sally, had he sent his son on a last-minute excursion all the way from Hampshire up to Tannasgan to make sure that the holiday would be worth while? For that amount of trouble and expense to be of value, Jeremy ought to have been sent to Tannasgan long before the final arrangements were concluded.

Sally was cogitating along these lines when the first of the large caravans arrived, towed by a jeep. The other two caravans followed close behind it. They were preceded and led by Sir Humphrey, who was driving a roomy Ford and the rear was brought up by an estate car. With Sir Humphrey were his wife and Angela Barton. Phyllis, of course, was not with them. In the estate car were Nigel Parris with his wife Marjorie beside him, and on the back seat was Hubert



Pring.

Sally's heart sank. With three cars, including her van, at the disposal of the party, she began to wonder whether her promised rôle of free-lance and liaison officer was in jeopardy. She had been standing at the door of the hotel when the jeeps, the caravans and their escorts arrived, but, as soon as she saw the whole of the cortège beginning to draw up, she retreated upstairs to her room. She was not anxious to be swept up by Lady Calshott sooner than was absolutely inevitable.

From her vantage point she surveyed the scene. Sir Humphrey decanted his passengers at the door of the inn and then drove off, followed by the jeeps and their caravans, in the direction of the loch. The other party drove into the inn yard and when they reappeared they were joined by Jeremy, who had been refreshing himself, Sally supposed, at the bar, where it seemed likely that the others, judging by their smiles and gesticulations, were also likely to put in time before they had their lunch.

It was such a short distance to the bridge over the little river which flowed out at the sea end of the loch, that Sally seated herself at her window to await the return of Sir Humphrey. Lady Calshott and Angela Barton, she supposed, had been shown to their rooms and were tidying up after their journey. She wondered, idly and without any real interest in the matter, how many nights they had spent on the road and where they had stayed on the way. She also wondered what had happened to the Benson twins and the Tamworth couple.

Sir Humphrey did not return and so Sally remained where she was until a gong reminded her that it was lunch-time. She washed her hands, tidied her hair and went down. There was no escape. Lady Calshott and Angela were seated at a table which she would have to pass in order to reach her own. There was nothing for it but to greet them.

'Sally, my dear!' exclaimed Lady Calshott. 'How very nice! Sit down, won't you?'

'Well, I've got a table reserved for myself,' said Sally. 'I've been here a couple of days already, you see.'

'Really! Good gracious me! You *are* an enthusiast! Humphrey *will* be pleased!'

'I can't claim any virtue, I'm afraid,' said Sally. 'I came up early to visit friends in Inverness.'

'I see. Well, perhaps you're right not to join us at table for this particular meal. We shall have to wait for Humphrey and goodness knows how long it will take him to have those caravans planted exactly where he wants them.'

‘From what I saw yesterday when I was over on the loch-side, there isn’t much choice,’ said Sally. ‘You can only get part of the way along.’

‘Oh, my goodness! Then Humphrey will be ages sorting things out!’ said Angela resentfully. ‘I’m hungry.’

‘Oh, well, why don’t you join Sally at her table, then?’ said Lady Calshott impatiently. ‘I feel I must wait for Humphrey, but I’m sure Sally won’t mind accommodating you if you’re so anxious for your food. We can’t expect the waitress to serve one lunch and not the other at the same table. You don’t mind, Sally, do you, if Angela joins you? Anything rather than she should starve to death!’

Seeing nothing for it but to give in gracefully, Sally agreed that she did not mind. She went further, and said that she would be pleased. This was true, in a sense. Lady Calshott had made it impossible for her to lunch alone, so she was obliged to choose between sitting down with the other two and sharing their agony of starvation, or of having lunch with a woman she did not like. She made her choice, and led the way to her table.

‘What’s it like at this place?’ Angela enquired, looking superciliously around.

‘Quite good. There’s not much variety, though.’

‘Of food, you mean? That won’t bother me, so long as there’s enough of it.’

‘No trouble about that. It’s plain, wholesome and lavish.’ They ordered, and then said Sally, making conversation, ‘What do you think? I met Jeremy Tamworth down on the beach here yesterday.’

‘Jeremy? I knew he wasn’t at home, but I thought he was in London.’

‘Well, he wasn’t in London yesterday afternoon. He said his father had sent him on ahead to report on the situation and decide whether the expedition was going to be worthwhile.’

‘What a strange idea! They can’t begin backing out now! All the arrangements are made. Humphrey will be livid if the Tamworths let him down. Personally, I think Master Jeremy had other and less excusable fish to fry.’

‘I don’t think they want to back out. Jeremy has been staying in the village. He said he’s heard lots of reports of people who’ve seen the monster.’

‘Have *you* heard anything?’

‘Quite the reverse,’ said Sally. ‘The people here at the hotel are sure there’s nothing in the loch but fish.’

It turned out that, although the inn could feed the visitors, it could not accommodate them all with beds. That night Angela, the Calshotts, Major and Mrs Tamworth and the twin sisters were to sleep in the house, Sally in her motorised van, and the rest of the party were to be found beds in the village and were to return to the inn for breakfast. Jeremy retained his former lodging and Sir Humphrey, who had come back to join his wife for a very late lunch, found that the Bensons, the major and his wife were seated with her at table, having flown to Abbotsinch airport and come on to Tannasgan in a hired car paid for (as Angela explained spitefully to Sally later) by Sir Humphrey, although he could ill afford the extra money.

At half-past seven there was a gathering at the inn for dinner and a final briefing. Jeremy, challenged thereto by Angela, gave an account of the reports he had had of the monster and a delighted Sir Humphrey drew parallels between the sightings Jeremy reported and the very similar stories told by watchers at Loch Ness.

Sally contributed nothing to the discussion which followed. She was now beginning to wonder, in view of what Jeremy appeared to have heard in the village, whether Mrs McLauchlin might have her own reasons for denying any knowledge of the monster. To change the subject, although she scarcely knew why she wanted to do so, she made civil enquiry of Lady Calshott concerning the whereabouts of Phyllis and was told that she had received a last-minute invitation to visit a College friend who had married and gone to Australia, but who was now in England for six weeks.

‘Phyllis will be with us in a few days’ time,’ added Lady Calshott, ‘so it won’t be long before you get your companion. We expect her on Sunday or Monday—she wasn’t quite sure which it would be. In the meantime we shall ask you to share a tent with Angela.’

‘Share a tent?’

‘Only during the hours people are on watch, of course. You will still be able to sleep in your van,’ said Sir Humphrey. ‘I found that we could not keep watch on the whole of the loch from the caravans, so I have arranged to have a couple of tents at the points which the caravans can’t cover, two people to each tent. They will return to their caravan for meals and to spend the night, of course. We shall also use the empty hunting-lodge as a base, because it can be reached by boat, otherwise we should need a third tent.’

‘And you want me to take on one of the tents?’

‘With Angela, until Phyllis turns up. I don’t think I ought to expect people to

remain on their own at a watch-point all day long. Apart from considering their own feelings—and this kind of watching can be a boring sort of business—we really need confirmation of any evidence of a sighting. You don't mind, I hope?

Sally saw nothing for it but to smile in an acquiescent manner, but her heart sank again when Lady Calshott said,

‘Angela, of course, will only be with us for a fortnight, so you and Phyllis will be able to enjoy one another's company as tent-watchers when she goes.’

‘Before she goes,’ said Angela, ‘actually.’

‘Angela has taken a post as housekeeper to our vicar,’ explained Sir Humphrey. ‘He is on holiday at present, but a fortnight is all he allows himself. Angela naturally cannot expect him to cope on his own when he gets back. His old housekeeper died recently and he really must have somebody to look after the domestic side of things.’

‘So Angela goes and Phyllis comes and I shall still be immobile,’ said Sally. ‘I shall still be helping to man a tent.’

‘That's it,’ said Lady Calshott, cheerfully. ‘You will have heaps to talk about, you and Phyllis. I know what gossips girls are when they get together.’

‘Don't forget to keep on the look-out for the monster, though,’ said Sir Humphrey. ‘Well, now, to finish off the briefing so that we all know what we shall be doing and where we shall be doing it: I think my own caravan had better remain nearest to the village so that I keep in touch with the hotel, the post-office and the shops. The major's party will take the south shore opposite the islands and Nigel's group will also be on the south side of the loch, but further up, and will be responsible for handling the boat, as, of the four of them, three are strong young men. Sally and Angela will be on the north side and their tent is pitched about a mile along it. The boat, Nigel, must be rowed across every day to where you will see the deserted hunting-lodge. This will shelter you in case of rain. I have the key and permission to make use of the building. Altogether we shall have six cameras in operation and in this way we can cover most of the loch, I hope.’

‘As for Sally, I *did* want her to act as liaison officer to keep us all in touch with one another and to report back to me if there is anything I ought to be told, including, of course, any sightings, but she has agreed to team up with Angela until Phyllis arrives. The people manning the tents will have breakfast and the evening meal in their caravans with the others of their party and will take turns in going back to the caravan for lunch and tea. The tents, I thought, could be manned on a rota system, so that everybody gets a change.’

‘As leader of my party, I declare no use for a rota,’ said the major. ‘Catherine and I will stick to the caravan and Miss Godiva and Miss Winfrith will take the tent.’

‘I’m turn with you and Mrs Tamworth,’ said Godiva Benson, ‘surely?’

‘No reason why. You won’t have to sleep in the tent. It’s only during the day,’ returned the major testily. Godiva stood her ground.

‘Share and share alike,’ she said. ‘I am under nobody’s orders, and the caravan is much to be preferred. Week in caravan, week in tent. Fair play, if you don’t mind, Major Tamworth.’

‘Oh, very well, very well. Trust you ladies to make a fuss over details. The thing is, can you cook? The women in the caravan are responsible for all the meals, you know.’

‘I hold a *cordon bleu* certificate and Winfrith is a trained dietician, Major,’ said Godiva shortly.

The major grunted. His wife Catherine said nervously, ‘That sounds very nice.’

‘Well,’ said Angela, when she was bidding Sally goodnight at the door of the inn, ‘I don’t blame Miss Benson for standing up to the major. I have always considered him a most selfish and obnoxious man and he has a dubious reputation. I can’t think why Humphrey asked the Tamworths to come. Catherine is a doormat and I don’t trust Jeremy an inch. I’ve had occasion, you know, to *watch* him. He is doing his best to seduce that stupid Parris woman and, with her husband as he is, I shall not be at all surprised if he succeeds.’ She looked at Sally as though she was waiting to be asked a question. All that Sally said was that she still wondered why Jeremy had turned up at Tannasgan a week before the appointed day.

‘Well, come to that,’ said Angela, giving Sally a peculiarly malicious smile, ‘you came a little earlier yourself than you need have done.’

‘Yes,’ said Sally, ‘I came early, but only to look for monsters, not young men. Goodnight.’

‘I say,’ said Hubert Pring, coming into the inn yard where Sally’s van was to remain for the night with her in it, ‘are you sure you’ll be all right out here in this thing?’

‘Of course I shall. Why not?’

‘Well, people leaving the bar at turning out time, and all that, you know.’

‘Oh, that’s all right. I did have a room at the pub for the last couple of nights, but I’ve given it up to Angela Barton, as they’re short of accommodation here. I

don't mind in the least, I assure you.'

'I expect Marjorie Parris would keep you company, you know. I mean, not just for tonight, but when we all take to the caravans. We three men could easily do without her and shift for ourselves for meals and things, so long as she did her daytime stint of watching the loch. This van sleeps two, doesn't it?'

'No, it sleeps one, when I'm in it. Thanks all the same.'

'Oh, well, goodnight, then, but, if you *do* get nervous at any time, I'm sure we could fix you up.'

'It's very kind of you, but I assure you...'

'I only meant—well, I suppose you know the meaning of Loch na Tannasg?'

'No. I'm not a student of Gaelic'

'It means Lake of the Ghost. Tannasgan means Ghosts.'

'Thanks for telling me,' said Sally. 'Goodnight. Don't go hearing skirling and groans, will you?'

'I should only think it was the monster. One account I read before I came here states that they make a noise like the baying of hounds or the lowing of cattle.'

'You'd better go,' said Sally, 'before you *really* frighten me.'

Early on the following morning and in a thick mist Sally began her first watching-session with Angela. Angela was aggrieved, for Sally, who intended to allow no precedents to be established, had refused point-blank to take the motorised van as far up the loch-side as the tent.

'I'm leaving it within sight of Sir Humphrey's caravan,' she said. 'The rest of the road is so narrow that I'm not at all keen on driving along the side of the loch in this mist. It isn't all that far to walk, and it's very much safer.'

'Oh, well,' said Angela, 'you must do as you like with your own van, I suppose.'

'I thought I'd been told you like walking,' said Sally. Angela eyed her, but said no more.

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## CHAPTER 6

### Leviathan Stirs

‘Nor would she none should dream  
Where she abideth,  
Humble as is the stream  
Which by her slideth.’

*Michael Drayton.*



(1)

By tea-time on the second day Sally was longing for an excuse (but she could not think of one which would pass muster) for giving up the quest for the monster and returning to the comfort and friendliness of the Stone House. A letter addressed to her at her friends' place in Inverness had informed her that Dame Beatrice would not, after all, be paying a round of visits and Sally found herself longing for her grandmother's presence in place of that of Lady Calshott and, more particularly still, that of Angela Barton.

With regard to Angela, Sally soon realised that even the society of Phyllis, boring and irritating though that might be, was preferable to mornings and afternoons spent at the tent with nobody but Angela for company.

Angela was so spiteful as to be a most embarrassing companion. She commented cynically upon the Calshotts and speculated uncharitably upon the relationships between all the younger members of the expedition. At first Sally attempted to treat these snide and unpleasant references with amusement, but Angela refused to be side-tracked and persisted with her malicious innuendoes and bitter jibes.

Sally told her flatly that she was not interested in scandal and back-biting, but it appeared that Angela was obsessed, so, in the end, Sally concluded that these morbid preoccupations were the outcome of disappointment and frustration and, although she heartily wished her partner elsewhere and looked forward to the time (only a matter of a day or two, fortunately) when she would be rid of

her company, she found herself beginning to pity Angela.

The second afternoon at the tent was almost a replica of the first. They had separated for lunch, and there had been further bitter references by Angela to people who would rather wear out their legs and their shoe-leather than be generous enough to use motorised transport. Sally had remained adamant, even after the mist had cleared, about bringing her van along the rough, narrow road to the tent. Now, the lunch interval over, she and Angela were again seated together at the loch-side.

The camera was above them, perched in what Sir Humphrey had decided was the most favourable position, on a small bluff. Unfortunately it had been discovered that although there was room up there for one person to stand, there was nowhere sufficiently level for even one chair to be placed. The arrangement, therefore, was that another camera should be erected on its tripod on the shore of the loch and that both watchers, equipped with powerful binoculars, should keep watch beside it. In the event of anything out of the ordinary being sighted, Angela, who, to Sally's astonishment, could scramble about like a mountain goat, was to scale the slope to the bluff, while Sally operated the camera which was on the lower level.

Angela, whom Sally had diagnosed as some kind of psychopath, soon began upon her favourite subject.

'I'd like to know what there is between Jeremy Tamworth and Marjorie Parris,' she said not for the first time. 'Something is going on there. I've suspected it for a long time. They are *together* far too much while Nigel is at work—when they're at home, I mean.'

'That's their business,' said Sally shortly.

'I think somebody ought to drop a hint to Nigel.'

'Look,' said Sally wearily, 'if there is anything to know, Nigel knows it already. Good heavens! You share a caravan at nights with the Calshotts. Do you really think you wouldn't know whether, for instance, they ever have rows? Not that I suppose they do,' she added hastily, wondering whether Angela's outlook on life was beginning to affect her own.

'That's all *you* know, my dear. Be that as it may—and I have no wish to speak ill of Mildred who is, after all, my cousin—I'd like to know what Marjorie Parris was up to while Nigel was at his annual conference.'

'Oh, look, really, Angela...'

'No, I mean it.'

'What conference would that be?' asked Sally, hoping to slant the



conversation in an innocuous direction.

‘Oh, well, the Veterinary thing, you know. Nigel is our local vet, and they go off every year to some seaside place or other and confer and, I suppose, listen to speeches and have gala dinners and so on. He was away for more than a week this summer, just before we came here. I happen to *know*.’

‘Well, I hope he enjoyed himself.’

‘He didn’t take Marjorie with him.’

‘Perhaps wives weren’t invited. I say, don’t you think we ought to concentrate a bit more, instead of gossiping?’

‘This is not gossip, Sally. I take a serious view of what goes on in the village, and there was all this talk about Jeremy going to London.’

‘Well, why shouldn’t he go to London?’

‘That’s the point, don’t you see. He didn’t go to London. He came up here.’

‘Yes, I know. I ran into him. I’ve said so.’

‘Well, what was he doing up here?’

‘The major...’

‘Oh, nonsense, Sally! I’ll tell you why he came, and I can guess who came with him, what is more.’

‘He came up to see what it was like, and whether the holiday would be worth while.’

‘Yes, he came to spy out the lie of the land and to find out what the opportunities were, and *I* believe Marjorie Parris came with him.’

‘Look here, you’ve no right to assume such a thing, Angela.’

‘Then where was she while Nigel was at his conference?’

‘What does it matter to you where she was? In any case, Jeremy was most definitely on his own when I met him.’

‘Of course he was. Marjorie had to be home in time to greet Nigel on his return.’

‘That’s nonsense. Why should she come all this way for a couple of days?’

Angela picked up a stone and tossed it into the loch and said, without looking at Sally,

‘Well, I’m not one of the permissive society. I’ve no use for goings-on, especially when one party is married. Besides, the Calshotts *do* quarrel. He’s not her first, you know.’

‘I know that Phyllis is Lady Calshott’s daughter by a previous marriage, but now let’s drop the subject, shall we? I think I’ll take a short walk, or perhaps *you’d* like to. You can get quite a long way towards the head of the loch if you

don't mind a bit of a scramble.'

'And Godiva and Winfrith Benson are illegitimate, and *that's* not generally known. Their father and mother lived together, but never married,' said Angela, as Sally extricated herself from a small folding chair and stood up. Sally made no reply except to say lightly,

'Well, what do you expect of artists?'

'Their *mother* wasn't an artist,' said Angela, in such a spiteful tone that Sally, accustomed as she had become to Angela's comments and suggestive statements, again began to wonder whether the woman was not, in fact, a little mad. She wandered off, returning only in time to find that Angela had gone away from the tent, presumably to the caravan to have her tea.

This to-and-fro for meals, Sally again reflected, might have been very irksome had she been paired-off with a different companion. She sat down at the waterside in the chair she had vacated previously, and thought how pleasant it would be to have Laura Gavin with her instead of the spiteful busybody with whom she now was teamed. In spite of the difference in their ages, she and Laura had hit it off extremely well at the Stone House, and Sally contrasted the Amazonian Laura's high spirits and open, uncomplicated thought-patterns with those of the sour, devious, spiteful little cousin to Lady Calshott.

Angela returned anon and Sally went off to have her own tea. Lady Calshott was in good spirits and informed her that Sir Humphrey had been into the village to see whether there was any correspondence (the expedition had a *poste restante* there) and had picked up a telegram from Phyllis.

'She is staying a little longer than we expected,' said Lady Calshott, 'but she expects to be here in another two days. I think, Humphrey, I will go to the airport to meet her. I'm sure Nigel Parris would take me if you feel that you ought to stay here.'

'Oh, really, Mildred!' exclaimed Sir Humphrey. 'That will leave me short of a watcher on that shore at the most important part of the day.'

'I can hire a car in the village, then, I presume?'

'There is nothing to hire in the village except a boat to go fishing.'

'Such a pity your brother is not occupying his cottage this summer. He would have taken me to Glasgow without a doubt, and I suppose you would not have objected to that?'

Sally suddenly made up her mind. Lady Calshott was not the ideal companion on a long drive, but at least a trip to Glasgow would cut out one day of Angela's (by this time) hateful company.

‘My van,’ she began. Sir Humphrey vetoed the suggestion.

‘I can’t spare you to go off in your van,’ he said firmly. ‘I am not prepared to abandon my own observation post, and I do not trust Angela to keep careful watch unless you are on hand at that tent, Sally. No, Mildred, on no account are you to go to Glasgow. It is entirely unnecessary. Phyllis has full instructions upon how to get here, and she can direct the driver of the car she hires, if so be that he requires directing. We have no transport available from this end...’

‘Except Nigel Parris’s car. Oh, well, I should be most uncomfortable on a long journey in that, perhaps. Very well, then,’ said Lady Calshott resentfully. ‘More tea, Sally?’

## (2)

To Lady Calshott’s unconcealed annoyance, Phyllis turned up a day later than had been expected, and Sir Humphrey’s veto on the trip to meet her at the airport proved to be fully justified.

As soon as Phyllis had spent her first night in the caravan, Angela announced her intention of giving up the watch on Loch na Tannasg.

‘There is no need for three of us,’ she pointed out. ‘I have never been to Scotland before, and should like to see as much as I can in the few days which are left to me here.’

‘But what about Sally?’ asked Sir Humphrey. ‘And you yourself, how do you propose to get about with no means of transport?’

‘Oh, I shall manage,’ Angela replied, showing more amiability than Sally would have thought possible in so permanently disagreeable a person. ‘Shanks’s pony mostly, I expect. I’ve done a good deal of hilly walking in the Lake District. I shall manage, you’ll find.’

For the following few days the others saw nothing of her except at breakfast and the evening meal. She was vague as to where she had been, but nobody was particularly interested and the Calshotts did not pursue the subject except to hope that she had had a pleasant day and was not tired.

Once Angela had given up the daily stint of duty at the tent, Sally was left with Phyllis. At first the change from Angela was a welcome one. Soon, however, Sally began to feel restive and again to wish that she had never joined the expedition.

Phyllis, as Sally had known beforehand, was a prattler. Living the sheltered life she did, she had no alternative but to prattle. She prattled about her recent visit, (which was to people Sally had never met) she prattled about her family

affairs, about her men friends (most of whom, Sally suspected, were fictitious) and she prattled about relatives of whom Sally knew little and cared less.

Finding Sally unresponsive, she said suddenly:

‘You don’t really believe in the monster, do you, Sally?’

‘There’s plenty of first-hand evidence, so far as Loch Ness is concerned,’ replied Sally, surprised by the change of subject.

‘It’s only to encourage tourists. Angela says so.’

‘I disagree, but it’s a waste of time to argue. Why do you think Jeremy Tamworth spent all last week here?’ asked Sally, wondering whether Angela had confided her suspicions to Phyllis.

‘To get away from the major, I should think,’ Phyllis replied. ‘They don’t get on, you know. Do you get on with your people, Sally?’

‘Of course.’

‘Why?’

‘Father is brilliant and amusing; mother is a darling; that’s all.’

‘It’s very *vieux jeu* to get on with one’s parents nowadays.’

‘I expect it always was. What are we doing about tea today? I took first interval yesterday, so would you like to go back to the caravan now, and relieve me in about an hour and a half? Take two hours, if you like. I don’t in the least mind being on my own.’

‘Oh, *please* don’t rub *that* in! It’s very unkind.’

‘Anyway, off you go.’

‘We could toss up?’

‘No, no. You’re probably much hungrier than I am, and it’s nearly four o’clock.’

‘I certainly could do with a cuppa. I’ll tell you what! I know Mummy brought a couple of thermos flasks with her luggage. Why don’t I go and collect one and fill it and bring it back and with something to eat? That way I could be there and here again in no time, and we could have tea together. It would save you the walk later on.’

‘Please yourself. I wouldn’t mind the walk.’

‘Oh, *Sally!*’

‘Well, what more can I say? I’ve told you I don’t mind being left alone for a couple of hours.’

‘What did you mean about Jeremy?’

‘Oh, nothing.’

‘Do you like him, Sally?’

‘No, not much, but he’ll grow up some day, I suppose.’

‘He’s collected lots of stories about the monster, Daddy says.’

‘Collected them, or invented them?’

‘Oh, *Sally!*’

‘Well, Mrs McLauchlin at the hotel denies that there ever have been any sightings on Loch na Tannasg, and you’d think an innkeeper would know. She must hear all the local gossip, mustn’t she?’

‘But why would Jeremy make up all those stories? Just to get people interested?’

‘Yes, in him, not in the monster. You say he doesn’t believe in it.’

‘You *are* a cynic’

‘No, I’m a realist. Look, if you’re going along to get some tea, hadn’t you better make a start?’

‘All right, but I don’t like leaving you here alone. Suppose you *saw* anything! It’s just the sort of dead still afternoon that Daddy talks about. Whatever would you do?’

‘Film it, I hope. Oh, do push off, or you won’t be back before supper-time.’

Phyllis made a face at her and departed in search of sustenance. Sally stretched herself, raised herself out of her canvas-seated chair and went for a stroll along the loch-side. The caravans and tents had been so widely spaced that from where she was there was no sign of any other watcher. Opposite her the loch was at its broadest. She took her binoculars from their case and trained them on the surface of the loch. From what she had read she realised that conditions were perfect if a sighting of the monster was to be achieved.

Suddenly, far off and towards the head of the loch, she thought she could see a disturbance in the water. At first it was no more than a ripple, but there was not a breath of wind to ruffle the surface. Soon there was no doubt but that something was coming towards her. She crammed the binoculars into their case, stood up and scrambled towards the camera.

The movement on the water had become more pronounced as it advanced, and Sally’s heart began to beat a little faster.

‘This is *it!*’ she thought. ‘It isn’t a boat and it isn’t somebody swimming. Oh, let me—please let me—get a decent photograph!’

She was over-eager. She caught her foot in a heather-root and fell flat. She picked herself up and clutched at the heather, but had such difficulty on the steep bank that, when she had climbed it, the ripple had turned into a broad wake, not unlike that of a boat, but the magnificent fishtail which had appeared to be

pursuing some steadily-moving object down the middle of the loch was now nothing more than a distant swell upon the water. Miserably she attempted to estimate the rate at which whatever it was had been moving, but there were no objects on the opposite shore between which she could calculate distance.

Bitterly disappointed, she brushed herself down and, descending, much crestfallen, to the loch-side, she reseated herself in her small, square-seated, canvas chair and gazed mournfully at the water. The ripples washed lazily in, lapping very gently at the mud and making iridescent bubbles among the fringe of small boulders near the shore. The afternoon was warm and the air was languidly soft. Time passed. Sally felt her eyes closing. She opened them and looked at her watch. Phyllis had been gone for barely half-an-hour.

The ripples and small bubbles washed themselves away. There was no wind; there were no birds. The loch resumed its former faceless mask and Sally closed her eyes again. She was almost asleep when a steady sound compelled her to sit up and blink herself wide awake. A rowing boat was coming from the head of the loch. As she left her chair, the boat changed course and moved in towards her. The rower shipped his oars and he and his passenger splashed ashore and, with Sally's help, they dragged the boat sufficiently on to the strand.

They were the young married couple, Marjorie and Nigel Parris. Marjorie, bare-footed, tousle-haired, with feet and ankles muddy from pulling up the boat, was wearing washed-out jeans which came half-way down the calves of her plump legs. She wore dangling earrings and looked carelessly, healthily handsome.

'Did you see anything?' she demanded.

'Only the angel that troubled the waters,' Sally replied. 'How about you two?'

'Near as a toucher,' said Nigel. 'We'd have seen something if the water had been clear, but it's like brown Windsor soup out there in the middle. What happened to puking little Phyllis? Isn't she supposed to keep watch with you? Has she run home to mummy? Have you been unkind to the poor little darling?'

'She's gone to the caravan to get some tea,' said Sally, who, whatever her private opinion of Phyllis Calshott, was not prepared to discuss it with two people whom she scarcely knew. 'As soon as she comes back I shall have mine.'

'We had ours more than an hour ago,' said Nigel.

'We get so bored—at least, I do—that it simply isn't true,' said Marjorie. 'Meals are the only things which break the monotony. In every way, day after day, it seems to get worse and worse.'

‘Yes,’ said Sally, ‘I get pretty well browned off, but weren’t we warned by Sir Humphrey that it might be a boring sort of job?’

‘Yes, but surely not to this extent,’ said Marjorie, her cheerful, ingenuous countenance clouding over. ‘Besides, what has become of this arrangement that we were to be in parties of four? Our lot only see each other at breakfast and supper. There’s simply no fun at all. You’re the lucky one, Sally. You have got your own transport and all that. So have we, but we’re not allowed to use it.’

‘I might just as well not have my van,’ said Sally. ‘Having had the pleasure of Angela’s company, I’ve now got to partner Phyllis, you see, because Sir Humphrey wants two people manning each post.’

‘Well, what’s wrong with Phyllis and Angela manning this one?’

‘Didn’t you know that Angela has opted out? She is roaming the countryside —’

‘Seeking whom she may devour, no doubt. She lodged with us for a bit before she went to the Calshotts and then to the vicarage. We kicked her out, you know. Her tongue was beginning to get us into trouble,’ said Nigel.

‘Oh, well, once Phyllis arrived, I suppose Sir Humphrey wasn’t sorry to see the back of Angela,’ said Marjorie. ‘Is she staying at the hotel?’

‘Oh, no. She shares with Phyllis in the Calshotts’ caravan and we have her for breakfast and supper.’

‘Dashed indigestible, I should think,’ said Nigel, laughing at his own wit. ‘Well, I’m not exactly enamoured of the fair Phyllis, but I’d take her any day in exchange for the Barton.’

‘Talking of exchanges,’ said Marjorie, ‘I still think you might sometimes take on Hubert Pring and the caravan and let Jeremy have the boat.’

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## CHAPTER 7

### Cross-Currents

‘And proved plain there was no beast, nor  
creature bearing life,  
Could well be know to live in love without  
discord or strife.’

*Richard Edwardes.*



(1)

**J**eremy?’ said Nigel, colouring angrily. ‘I suppose you mean Jeremy and you!’

‘Well, why not?’

‘You know why not. I’m not going to have that half-baked young Casanova mucking about with my wife.’

‘Oh, don’t be so silly. He’s good for a bit of fun, which is more than can be said of *you* lately. Anyway, I’m sick to death of being fobbed off with Hubert Pring day after day. It isn’t fair. Why shouldn’t I have the use of the boat sometimes?’

‘You’re having it today, so for goodness’ sake stop bellyaching about the beastly boat.’

‘Now look here, Nigel...’

‘Oh, forget it! Sally doesn’t want to hear all this. For God’s sake don’t let’s start an argument.’

‘*I’m* not arguing. All I’m saying is that I’m not going to be stuck with that clot Hubert while you and Jeremy go off fishing, or whatever, on your own. Hubert is *your* affair, not mine. I can’t stand the sight or sound of him. He stands there looking like something left over from Einstein’s theories and spouting all that redundant information about the geology of the Highlands, until I could hit him over the head with one of his own saucepans. Why you had him to stay with us in the first place I can’t imagine, and then, to bring him here...!’



‘You know perfectly well why I have to be civil to the fellow. I owe him money.’

‘Well, pay him and let’s get rid of him.’

‘And beggar myself for the next two or three years? Talk sense, darling.’

‘Well, *you* stay in the caravan with him, then. It’s not fair for you to be taking Jeremy into partnership all the time. What about me? I’m bored sick and silly in that caravan with Hubert Pring.’

‘I’m not having you pair off with Jeremy, either in the caravan or up at the lodge, so you needn’t think it. Well, Sally, we’d better be off. Just wondered whether you’d seen that peculiar upheaval in the loch. Will you report it to Sir Humphrey and say we can confirm it?’

‘Of course. I’m glad I wasn’t dreaming. I tried to get to our camera, but I couldn’t reach it in time.’

‘Not that I believe it was the monster, of course. Tidal wave, or, as Margie thought, an otter,’ said Nigel. ‘We hadn’t got a camera with us, anyway. Wonder whether Sir Humphrey or Phyllis saw anything?’

‘Talking of Phyllis,’ said Marjorie, ‘well, I happen to know that she’s been on to her parents about your sleeping alone in your van. Says it isn’t really safe, and all that.’

‘Oh, does she? I’ve had one argument with her already about sharing my van, and only over my dead body does she do it. I don’t know why she’s so persistent. I snub her all the time, but it doesn’t seem to make a scrap of difference.’

‘We’re luckier than you are, in a way,’ said Marjorie. ‘We *can* swop partners if we get bored with each other.’

‘Oh, can we?’ asked Nigel. ‘I’ve already said—’

‘I can understand anybody getting bored with Hubert,’ said Sally. ‘He and Phyllis ought to make a pair and bore each other instead of boring other people.’

Nigel chuckled.

‘Wonder which of ’em would murder the other?’ he said. ‘Oh, well, come on. We’d better get back.’

‘All in good time,’ said Marjorie. ‘It makes a change to talk to Sally. I say, Sally, you don’t really think Phyllis would look at Hubert in a speculative way, do you? And what about Angela Barton?’

‘She’s about twice his age,’ said Nigel. ‘Come *on!*’

‘Oh, do stop rushing me. I think Angela would take anybody she could get. It’s common knowledge that she’s got her eye on our vicar, you know, Sally.’

‘Good God, you women!’ said Nigel.

‘Well, she *has*,’ Marjorie insisted. ‘Why has she taken this job as his housekeeper? What do *you* think?’

Nigel shrugged his thin shoulders and wagged his apostolic beard.

‘How should *I* know?’ he demanded.

‘Oh, well, I suppose you wouldn’t. But this business of going to be his housekeeper...’

‘I expect she needs the money,’ said Sally, knowing that this was not the case, but wishing to be charitable.

‘Can’t be that,’ said Nigel. ‘According to all accounts, she’s stinking rich.’

‘Quite well off, anyway,’ said Marjorie. ‘You’d think the Calshotts would have wanted to keep her with them. Expectations on darling Phyllis’s behalf, you know. Oh, well, I suppose we’d better push off. You’ll report to Sir Humphrey, as you promised, Sally, that we’ve seen the trail of this otter, or whatever it is, won’t you?’

‘It wasn’t an otter,’ said Nigel. ‘Perhaps it was a midget submarine. Aren’t the Nips supposed to be interested in Nessie and Morag and so on? Anyway, come along. We can’t stay here all day.’

Sally helped them push the boat out and stood on the edge of the water until they were lost to sight round a blackish spit of land which formed a promontory further up the loch. Then she returned to her chair, swept the surface of the water with her binoculars, and kept watch on the now unruffled stretch of bronze and silver until Phyllis returned from tea.

‘Mummy and Daddy have had a row. Isn’t it septic of them?’ Phyllis said. ‘I’ll tell you all about it, and then you can advise me as to which side I ought to take. I *do* rely on you, Sally. I always have.’

‘Well, rely on me when I’ve had my tea. I’m hungry,’ said Sally, picking up her handbag.

‘But you’d better understand the situation before you walk right into it,’ protested Phyllis. ‘It might be so embarrassing for you otherwise.’

‘I’m quite sure that your parents have far too much proper feeling to air their differences in front of me,’ said Sally. ‘By the way, I nearly had a sighting while you were gone, so keep your eyes skinned, won’t you?’

‘A sighting? Oh, Sally, no! Oh, why wasn’t I here?’

‘Because you were having your tea, and now I’m going to have mine.’

Lady Calshott welcomed her to the caravan, made fresh tea, provided sandwiches and cake and listened with apparent interest to the story of the

disturbance on the surface of the loch. Of Sir Humphrey there was no sign. Sally supposed that, either to transact some business at the post office and the shop or else to get away from his wife until the cause of their quarrel had blown over, he had made his way to the village. She ate a large tea, neither hurried over it nor lingered, and was about to leave her comfortable seat in the caravan and return to the tent when Lady Calshott said:

‘I’ve been thinking about your being alone in your little van at night, Sally dear. Now that you’ve tried it, don’t you think you’d feel much happier if Phyllis shared it with you?’

‘I am quite sure I shouldn’t,’ said Sally. ‘I much prefer to be alone.’

‘But, my dear, is it safe? I suppose you have money with you, and there are your watch and those very good binoculars of yours.’

‘I’m not in the least afraid of being burgled, Lady Calshott, My van does lock, you know.’

‘And, well, there are two unattached young men in the party. I wouldn’t like to have anyone *talk*. Don’t you think perhaps—?’

‘The two unattached young men are beside the point, Lady Calshott. If I can keep burglars out, I can certainly keep Hubert Pring and Jeremy Tamworth at bay. Besides, I don’t like either of them. I must remind you, too, that, from the beginning, you have known that I was bringing my own van and that I intended to keep it to myself.’

‘Oh, well, I promised Phyllis I would speak to you. I think you are being very wilful and selfish, Sally dear. I’m sure I haven’t slept properly these past nights for thinking about you, and worrying. And I know Phyllis feels the same. I’ve spoken to my husband about it, but, man-like, he refuses to become involved, so I thought I would put it to you myself. I am sure you wouldn’t want to cause us unnecessary anxiety.’

‘But, really, Lady Calshott, there is no need for anyone to feel anxious on my behalf.’

‘You’ve even moved your motor-caravan further off.’

‘But it is still in sight of this one. Do, please, let me mind my own business. As it is, I have not yet had what I was promised, as you will surely admit.’

‘I don’t know what you mean, Sally.’

‘It was understood that I should be given a roving commission and not be tied to a tent.’

‘Oh, but, as things have worked out, it hasn’t been possible. You must put the blame on Angela, not on us. She has proved extremely selfish over the whole

thing.'

'But you must have known that she was only to stay up here for a fortnight.'

'Yes, but too late for anything to be done about it.'

'I don't really see why Sir Humphrey can't be here alone during the day, while you share the tent with Phyllis.'

'I have just had that out with my husband. I am surprised that you should advance the same argument, Sally, especially as you *must* know how much Phyllis appreciates your society. But that is neither here nor there, I suppose. You seem to have this very strange urge to be alone all the time. I cannot think it healthy in so young a woman.'

'I'm sorry, Lady Calshott, but it's the way I feel.'

'And you won't consider sharing your van with Phyllis?'

'I'm sorry,' repeated Sally, and took herself back to the tent in a flaming temper which she felt would get out of control if she stayed any longer with Lady Calshott.

'That's the third disagreement in the camp,' she thought, as she tramped along the stony loch-side road. 'I wish to goodness I'd never come. I suppose that wretched Angela has been getting at Lady Calshott and Phyllis about my sleeping alone. What a mischief-maker that abominable little woman is! It was decent of Sir Humphrey to stick up for me, though. I suppose that led to the row Phyllis wanted to tell me about. Wish people would mind their own business! Funny, though, the way Marjorie kept harping on about being left alone with Hubert Pring. I wonder what she *does* do all day long? Oh, Lord! I'm beginning to think like Angela Barton, and heaven defend me from that!'

(2)

'I'm beginning to wish we hadn't come,' said Winfrith Benson to her sister.

'Yes, I know. I feel the same. It's turning out to be both boring and disagreeable. I *quite* thought we should be teamed up with Miss Lestrangle and Miss Calshott. It would have been far more suitable in every way. I don't like Major Tamworth, and his wife is completely under his thumb. I consider that Jeremy Tamworth and the other young man should be with them. Instead of that, the wretched boys go cavorting off with the Parrises and leave us to cope with the major, who is quite the most selfish and inconsiderate man I ever met.'

'I was quite alarmed yesterday when he came stamping over here and made himself so unpleasant.'

'Well, I suppose he's within his rights to demand his turn to remain in the

caravan, and he shall have it in a few days' time. It will not be long now before I am prepared to relinquish it to him.'

'But can he be sure of that?'

'Of course.'

'He did not seem at all satisfied, I thought.'

'Well, he is a man who expects all women to knuckle under to him in the same way as that spiritless wife of his does. He will have to live and learn. I am in possession of the caravan and have already worsted him in verbal battle. He will get the caravan when *I* choose, and not a moment sooner. One thing, though: it will stop that Barton creature dropping in here for snacks. She may appreciate my pastry, but she also leers triumphantly at us all the time she's here.'

'I'm afraid of that woman, Godiva.'

'Utter nonsense! It's for *her* to be afraid of *us*. She may have wormed her way into the vicarage, but by hook or by crook I'll get her out of it before long.'

'We don't want to make enemies, Godiva. We're the outsiders here, you know, and I'm beginning to feel conscious of the fact.'

'I don't consider myself to be an outsider at all. If I don't like the arrangements, I shall consider myself entirely at liberty to give up and go home.'

'We'd have to hire a car to get back to Glasgow before we could use our return air-fares, and that would be very expensive.'

'I don't believe there's a car for hire in the village, but we could hitch-hike, I suppose, as others do.'

'Is it safe nowadays to ask for a roadside lift?'

'Who would want to harm two spinsters of our age and class?'

'More to the point, Godiva, who would bother to *give* a lift to spinsters of our age?'

'Oh, well, it hasn't happened yet, Winfrith, and I really think we ought to be getting the tea. The major is sure to be wanting his by now. Men always want their tea, and a great deal to eat as well, and *that*, thanks to Sir Humphrey's lavish provisioning, we certainly can supply.'

'One of us ought to be outside. We're supposed to be keeping watch. I wonder if and when opportunity of a sighting will arise? This is much our best chance, you know.'

Reluctantly they stood up. The settee in the living quarters of the caravan was comfortable and the sisters had occupied it since the disgruntled departure of the major and his wife to man the tent after lunch. Godiva began to prepare for tea-time. Winfrith sallied forth, only to come back to the door of the caravan

immediately.

‘Quick! Quick!’ she cried. ‘It’s here! Our chance has come!’

Godiva flung down the cloth she had been about to spread and dashed out to join her sister. On the surface of the loch, out in the middle, was a long swell which broadened out as they watched.

The camera! The ciné-camera!’ cried Godiva. ‘Get up to it as quickly as you can, while I make a lightning sketch.’

‘I’ll make the sketch.’

‘All right, let’s both. I hate that filming business, anyway. We’re sure to make a mess of it, and that’s so wasteful and will only cause derision.’

They produced their sketching-blocks, but the broad wake, except for sending ripples up to the shore of the loch, remained nothing but the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.

### (3)

The arrangement was that all watching would cease officially at nine in the evening. Enthusiasts could carry on after that, if they pleased, for it remained light until after ten, but at nine the evening meal was taken and then, if there had been any sightings, a runner was to be sent from each caravan to report to Sir Humphrey before everybody settled down for the night.

On this particular evening Sir Humphrey received two reports. One came from Sally, the other from Godiva and Winfrith. Nigel and Marjorie said afterwards that they did not consider what they had seen to be worth a special report, and that they knew Sally would speak for them. Sir Humphrey, impressed and excited, promised a special briefing for everybody in the morning.

The night passed uneventfully. Sally, who was inflexibly determined to ignore Lady Calshott’s remonstrances and to adhere to her plan of sleeping alone in the dormobile, woke soon after dawn, dressed and walked back to the village for a bathe. As she walked she was thinking of Phyllis and, once again, of Lady Calshott’s suggestion.

‘Three nights of sharing my van with Phyllis, and there would have been a row,’ she said to herself. ‘I suppose the Calshott parents want the caravan to themselves.’

She enjoyed her bathe. When she returned to the caravan for breakfast with the others, Sir Humphrey, alert, rubicund, dressed and shaved, said blithely,

‘Now that we’ve almost had a sighting, I think we should extend the period of watching. No more early morning swimming, Sally. We should all be up and

moving by half-past four from now on, mist or no mist.'

'Half-past four in the morning?' exclaimed Lady Calshott. 'Don't be silly, Humphrey. Nobody is going to get up at half-past four *in the morning!*'

'Immediately after breakfast Sally must take a message round,' said Sir Humphrey implacably. 'We're not going to miss a sighting because people are hogging it in bed instead of being out on the job. If everybody goes to bed directly after dinner, there is plenty of time for sleep. Half-past nine until four a.m. comes to six and a half hours. Nobody wants more sleep than that in the summer.'

'Oh, *Daddy!*' said Phyllis. 'Of course they do!'

'I have not the smallest intention of getting up before it is light and eating my breakfast at dawn,' said Lady Calshott, 'and neither has Phyllis. She needs her rest. We all do, so don't talk nonsense, dear.'

'When I was one of the Loch Ness people,' said Sir Humphrey, 'we were *always* roused at half-past four. It was the understood thing and nobody complained, so far as I can remember. But, of course, we were *dedicated* people up there.'

'I should think you would need to be,' said Lady Calshott.

'Well, you and Sally can go on watch at four-thirty if you like, but, as I said, Phyllis and I will rise at a reasonable hour, and I quite expect that the monster, if there *is* one, will have equally sensible habits.'

'You yourself didn't see what some of us saw in the loch,' said Sally, 'did you, Sir Humphrey?'

'Unfortunately I was in the village at the time,' Sir Humphrey replied.

'I wish *I'd* seen it,' said Phyllis. 'Some people have *all* the luck. And I think you might have told me you were going swimming this morning, Sally. I would have come with you.'

'That's what I was afraid of,' thought Sally. Aloud she said, 'Oh, well, I'm sorry if you would have liked to bathe, but it was so early that I didn't like to disturb you.'

'It wasn't as early as four-thirty, I imagine,' said Angela, who was already equipped for walking. 'Anyway, if I were staying longer, I should certainly not be foolish enough to rise at such an ungodly hour and go out in these treacherous mists.'

'They are not more treacherous than the hills you scramble about on,' said Sir Humphrey. 'I don't think you ought to climb alone. Suppose something happened to you? You never give us the slightest inkling of where you are going

each day. If you ever met with an accident we might have great difficulty in finding you.'

'Oh, nothing untoward will ever happen to me,' said Angela in a tone of contempt, as of one addressing an inferior being.

'Oh, come, there's always hope,' said Sally flippantly. Angela looked daggers at her. Later, Sally wished she had not spoken, and not for the first time in her life.



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## CHAPTER 8

### The Sighting

‘A very ancient and fish-like smell.’

*William Shakespeare.*



**A**nd that reminds me to ask a favour of you, Angela,’ said Sir Humphrey. ‘I’m sure you won’t mind just for an hour or so. I need Sally this morning for the errands I mentioned and as it is our rule not to leave one person alone on watch—more important than ever, now that I’ve had these reports of a near-sighting...’

‘If you mean you want me to keep watch with Phyllis at the tent until lunchtime, I suppose I shall have to agree,’ said Angela, interrupting him. ‘I have only two more clear days here, but I don’t suppose that will weigh with anybody.’

‘Well, thank you, Angela. I think we shall be able to free you long before lunch,’ said Sir Humphrey.

‘Oh, I shall lunch here. I conduct my excursions on foot and have no wish to carry a thermos flask and a parcel of food with me.’

This speech meant nothing to anybody, since none of the company had even so much as wondered where and how she usually got her lunch on these daylong expeditions of hers.

‘Just as you like, of course,’ said Sir Humphrey genially. ‘I don’t suppose Sally will object to a little free time when she has done her visiting rounds. You won’t be able to get across the loch to the hunting-lodge, Sally,’ he went on, turning to her, ‘because I expect the boat will already be over there by the time you get to Nigel Parris’s caravan, unless perhaps you could go there first and catch two of the young men before they cross the loch. If you start at once...’

‘Surely there’s no hurry?’ said Angela Barton. ‘It’s very misty out there. I hope you don’t expect me to go off to the tent already!’

‘I want everybody to be in position as early as possible. If the creature was in motion yesterday afternoon, it may mean that our presence has disturbed it. If

that is so, it may surface at any time, perhaps to take a look at us.' He spoke in light and easy tones, but Sally thought there was a fanatical gleam in his eye.

'Oh, well, Phyllis, I suppose we had better move off, then,' said Angela crossly. 'Personally, I consider so early a start to be quite unnecessary.'

'And so do I,' said Lady Calshott. 'Be sure to wrap up well, Phyllis dear. These morning mists are very treacherous. As for the Parrises and Jeremy Tamworth, if I know anything of *them*, that caravan party will not stir until ten at the earliest, and I really do not think Sally should attempt to drive along the side of the loch until the mist thins out.'

Sir Humphrey went to the door of the caravan.

'It is lifting already,' he said. 'Off you go, Sally. Pitch it strong that I want everybody on watch and on the alert. Something tells me that we're going to get a sighting today.'

Sally returned to her van, which she had left about five hundred yards further up the loch and, although the mist was lifting as the sun began to break through, her hair was damp and her eyes were slightly smarting by the time she climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine.

She reversed before she could turn, then she crossed the bridge and was soon traversing the south shore. At the major's caravan there were no signs of life. She by-passed it and drove up to the van which was nearer to the head of the loch. Here the only person astir was Marjorie, who appeared at the door of the caravan when she heard Sally drive up.

'Oh, hullo,' she said. 'You're up and about early.'

'Under orders,' said Sally. 'Sir Humphrey wants *everybody* up and about and at their posts. He's got a feeling we shall get a sighting today.'

'What, in this mist?'

'It will clear soon. Will you tell your boat people to get across the loch as soon as ever they can and man their camera and *really* keep on the alert?'

'I'll *tell* them, but it won't be any good expecting them to cross until they've had their elevenses, let alone their breakfast. Besides, what good would it do? They wouldn't see a thing, even if they were willing to take the boat over as early as this, which they won't be, the lazy erks.'

'Well,' said Sally, 'I've left the message. I can't do any more.'

'Like a cup of coffee? I'm going to have one before I rout out that hoggish lot and give them their breakfast. You be thankful, Sally, that you haven't got three great hulking hungry brutes to look after.'

'I've got Phyllis.'

‘But not to feed. Anyway, has Angela gone home yet?’

‘Not yet. That’s why I’m let off the hook this morning to do visiting rounds and get everybody keyed up for a sighting. But I’ll be back on the beat tomorrow, I expect. I don’t think Angela is taking kindly to another spell of duty at the tent.’

‘I think she’s jolly sensible to turn us down at the end of a fortnight. If I’d had any sense I’d have done the same thing myself. I’m beginning to loathe this so-called holiday. All Nigel and I do is quarrel, Jeremy sulks, and Hubert Pring is impossible. Oh, well, come inside, if you want that coffee.’

‘I’d love it,’ said Sally truthfully, pushing the mist-damp hair out of her eyes, ‘but I don’t think I’d better stop. I’ve got to wake up the major’s lot and get his tent-people off to man their beat.’

Marjorie chuckled.

‘He’s met his match in Godiva Benson,’ she said. ‘I wish I could say the same about that damned Barton woman. She’s been trying to spread all sorts of rumours about Jeremy Tamworth and me. It’s poisoning Nigel’s mind and he’s suspicious and possessive enough already. I wish I could throw a spanner into *her* works in return. You know why she’s got herself organised at the vicarage, don’t you?’

‘I heard she’s to be—or, rather, is—the housekeeper,’ said Sally. ‘We mentioned it yesterday. I expect he needs somebody to run that side of things while he goes about his work in the parish.’

‘He needs a *wife*, and that’s what bloody Angela is setting out to be. The trouble is that, left to himself, he’d probably choose Winfrith Benson. Winfrith would make him an excellent wife, and it would mean the twins could give up their cottage and go and live at the vicarage.’

‘What, both of them?’

‘Of course. There’s plenty of room in that rambling, ramshackle old house, and it would not be possible for Winfrith and Godiva to separate. Besides, they say there is one of the attics with a perfect north light for their work. “And now comes this wretched Angela Barton to step in and spoil things for us,” says poor old Winfrith.’

‘I expect everything will turn out all right,’ said Sally. ‘Well, I really must be going. Don’t forget to give the boys Sir Humphrey’s message. If they won’t take notice, well, that won’t be your fault.’ She climbed into her van and drove off to report to Sir Humphrey after she had visited the major and his party.

The only person awake at the major’s caravan seemed to be Winfrith, and

even she appeared only after Sally had kept up a repeated tapping on the door. Winfrith was a washed-out copy of her stronger-minded sister and was, in fact, by several hours the younger twin. Her hair was a pale yellow compared with her sister's darker locks, and her eyes were watery, prominent and slightly anxious, as though she were prepared to please but was uncertain of success. As she opened the door and saw Sally she blinked nervously, but immediately seemed to recover her calm.

'Oh, hullo. Good morning,' she said. 'Has anything happened? I thought you were the monster!' She giggled. 'Isn't it rather early for paying calls?'

'Sorry to wake you,' said Sally briefly, 'but Sir Humphrey wants everybody up and about and on duty as early as possible.'

'I wish Sir Humphrey would try to get the major to go on duty, then. It won't be any use for *me* to give him orders. All he and Mrs Tamworth are here for is to take a lazy holiday, it seems to me. *He* goes wandering off and *she* sits in the shade and snoozes, and that's about all. I do think it's too bad of them. Ever since they had that argument with Godiva about the tent, they've been perfectly beastly to us. At least, *he* has. *She* really doesn't count. Godiva says that Mrs Tamworth is one of the wives who really make her believe in Women's Lib.' Winfrith giggled again. Her sister joined her at the door of the caravan. Winfrith stepped out into the mist to give way to the stronger character.

'Oh, hullo,' said Godiva. 'And what brings *you* out so bright and early?'

'Not exactly bright,' said Winfrith.

'Have you come to tell us that Angela's gone?' pursued Godiva, ignoring her sister, an attitude to which, Sally thought, Winfrith was accustomed and did not resent.

'Hardly a matter of sufficient importance to cause me to disturb you at this hour of the morning, surely?' said Sally, interested to know that Angela's departure seemed to figure so largely in the thoughts of the sisters and Marjorie Parris.

'Oh, well, I don't know so much,' said Godiva. 'Angela snoops, you know. I've caught her at it. *And* she's a mischief-maker. I mean, everybody knows what goes on between Jeremy Tamworth and Marjorie Parris, and about poor old Nigel being so possessive and jealous, but it takes Angela Barton to make something beastly out of it.'

'Yes,' said Sally shortly, 'Marjorie was telling me. Oh, well, I'll be off. You'll give the major Sir Humphrey's message, won't you?'

She found the leader of the expedition restless and perturbed. Sir Humphrey

was pacing up and down outside his caravan watching the loch, it was true, but that his mind was on other things was soon made clear. He greeted Sally with his usual pleasant courtesy, listened to her report and then said,

‘Nothing seems to go right this morning and it is all the fault of that woman.’

Sally was in no doubt of the identity of the woman to whom he referred. She said,

‘Oh, well, she won’t be with us much longer.’

‘She isn’t with us now, so far as that goes.’

‘You mean she’s gone home already?’

‘I have no idea. She said that she had not wanted to speak out in front of you, but, as soon as you had gone, she rounded on my wife and suggested that Mildred should accompany Phyllis to the tent, as she herself had no intention of going there.’

‘Oh, dear!’

‘Yes, indeed. My dear wife remonstrated with her, but the only result was that Angela then quite lost her head and began to make the most fantastic accusations about other members of the party.’

‘Including me?’

‘She wondered why you insisted upon sleeping alone in your van.’

‘I see. Charming of her. By the way, the Bensons told me that she snoops. Very unpleasant of her, if it’s true.’

‘It’s true, all right,’ said Sir Humphrey, ‘but what she came out with is not for your ears, Sally. In fact, as soon as she began, my wife sent Phyllis out of earshot.’

‘What a shame!’ said Sally flippantly. ‘But I’m more used to the slings and arrows of outrageous malice than Phyllis is, I imagine, and as I seem to be one of those whom Angela (however obliquely) slandered, I think you should tell me what was said. I’m a big girl now, you know.’

‘Yes, your novel proves that,’ said Sir Humphrey, smiling. ‘We’ve decided, by the way, to publish it. You will be getting a letter later on.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Phyllis, when Sally had released Lady Calshott from tent duty and had taken her place on watch, ‘of course I listened. Daddy can’t *always* dictate to me. After all, I’m twenty-six, and one learns about most of it in English literature, not to speak of the Latin authors, anyway.’

‘Learns about what?’ asked Sally, despising herself for what she recognised as morbid curiosity, but hoping, all the same, to get from Phyllis what Sir Humphrey had declined to discuss with her.

‘Oh, well, the usual things, actually, as though everybody didn’t know. But, of course, it would take Angela to spew it all up in public’

‘All what?’

‘All about the Bensons setting their caps at the vicar and Godiva’s determination to compromise him to the point where he’d have to marry one of them. Of course she hasn’t managed it, but that she made the attempt is true enough, as anybody in the village would tell you. But can you blame them? The vicarage would be an ideal home for them, because, of course, they’d never think of separating, whichever one of them he married.’

‘Marjorie told me about it,’ said Sally, ‘and seemed to think that Angela had spiked their guns by getting the job as housekeeper.’

‘Yes, with great satisfaction she pointed that out to them, I’m afraid. Anyway, she told Daddy she did.’

‘Well, I know she’s spiteful and, apparently, she’s a schemer, but so were some of Jane Austen’s heroines, weren’t they?’

‘Oh, but, Sally, that’s the least of what she said. She not only said that there were goings-on (her horrid word, not mine) between Jeremy and Marjorie, but that Nigel is much fonder of animals than he is of Marjorie—only she put it a great deal more crudely, and that’s why Daddy sent me away—’

‘Why is he fonder of animals than he is of Marjorie? I mean, how do animals come into it? What made her think of them—apart from the fact that she’s wicked all through?’ asked Sally.

‘Oh, didn’t you know that Nigel is the local vet? Haven’t you noticed that wired-in bit he’s got at the back of his estate car? That’s for dogs, or a calf, or whatever.’

‘Oh, well, perhaps I *have* heard that he’s a vet, but I’ve only seen the estate car once, and that was when they drove up in it. They left it at the inn, but I didn’t bother to take a close look at it. By the way, how did Godiva and Winfrith Benson get here?’ (She knew, but wanted to change the subject.)

‘By air to Glasgow and then by hired car. Daddy paid, much to Mummy’s annoyance, but Daddy said they needed a holiday and it might be worthwhile to have them on the spot to do lightning impressions—sketches, you know—of the monster. Actually, I agree with Daddy. Not about the sketches, because I don’t believe they’d do any if they *did* see anything frightening, but *I* think they need a holiday. I believe they’re rather poor.’

Sally came nearer to liking Phyllis at that moment than she had done since their schooldays. When she remembered her own momentous piece of news, she

liked her still more.

‘Did you know that Sir Humphrey is going to publish my book?’ she asked.

‘Oh yes, of course. I knew he would,’ said Phyllis, putting on a self-appreciative and conspiratorial smile and so becoming insufferable once more.

‘Would you like to go and have your lunch?’ asked Sally bluntly. ‘It’s just gone twelve, so I expect it’s ready by now.’

‘Oh, I suppose I’d better, or you’ll have to wait much too long for yours. I do wish we could have it together. I think it’s *too* boring of Daddy to keep somebody on watch from morning to night.’

‘It’s reasonable. We don’t want to miss a sighting.’

‘Lunch is always awful, anyway. Sometimes I think it’s hardly worthwhile to take that rough walk, and such a long way, too, there and back, just for cold meat and vegetable salad out of a tin.’

‘Your mother cooks in the evening.’

‘Yes, but poor Mummy isn’t much good at it. Of course, it isn’t her fault. At home we have a cook and all Mummy does is the ordering.’

‘My grandmother has a cook, too—a man. He’s French and he sends in the most marvellous and delicious things. Grandmamma doesn’t even have to do the ordering. Henri’s wife sees to all that, and does a lot of the marketing, too.’

‘I wish you’d invite me there, Sally.’

‘How can I? I’m only a lodger there myself. I’m waiting to get a flat in Town. Push off and have your lunch, otherwise it will be tea-time before I get mine.’

Phyllis was gone for longer than Sally thought reasonable, but she reappeared at last, and Sally, wasting no words, went off to appease her own hunger. Except that there was wine, she found that the lunch was as Phyllis had stated and what she herself had expected. She ate it in twenty minutes, gratefully accepted a couple of glasses of wine, then took the rough road past her own van and along the side of the loch to rejoin Phyllis at the watching-post.

The early afternoon was warm and sunny, the air clear and beautifully, almost frighteningly, still. The mist had melted hours before and the mountains she could see in the distance loomed sombrely against a faint, ethereal sky. Nearer at hand, on both sides of the water, green and brown hillsides sloped down to the stony shores of the loch. A promontory hid the island near the head of the loch from Sally’s view, but beyond it the mountains seemed to have gathered themselves together, as peak rose behind peak and the colours varied from purple to faintest, far-off blue.

As Sally followed the path, the mountains changed. Their outlines hardened. They seemed nearer and, suddenly, menacing in their immobility and beauty and, save for Sally herself, there seemed to be no living creature in the universe except for a buzzard which was spiralling upwards with wide, unhurried sweeps of its rounded, finger-pointed wings. Suddenly it ceased to circle. Dropping plummet-wise as though it had sighted prey, it then flattened out and made for the head of the loch, flying horizontally and with a laboured motion of its pinions as though its broad-tailed body was almost too heavy for its wings. It began to give out a plaintive, persistent crying before it became a speck in the distant sky.

At the same time there was an abrupt confusion in the water. A shoal of fish—salmon or loch trout, maybe—began to make its way with such a rush of speed that the water was broken with rainbow diamonds of spray and the silver flash of bellies as the scurrying fish leapt from the water in their panic.

Suddenly conscious of what this extraordinary display might mean, Sally began to run. She had no camera with her, but she was near enough to the tent to be able to use the one she had failed to reach on the previous occasion. Phyllis was not manning it.

Before she could begin her own upward scramble or draw near the tent, however, another disturbance in the water followed and Sally stood, panting and transfixed, as a snake-like head on about a yard of dark-grey neck appeared above the water-line and not very far off-shore. Sally was aware of a foul and death-like smell and then of a large, pale eye in the flattened head. For an instant she felt certain that the creature looked surprised, and then, in widening circles of rippling brown water still flecked by the tempestuous rush of the fish, it dramatically and vertically submerged, but before the head disappeared and was lost to sight Sally could have sworn that the pale eye winked at her.



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## CHAPTER 9

### Sally Gets Her Rights

‘Shun divisions, as the beginning of evils.’

*St Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch.*



Sally's asseveration, before she had come to Tannasgan, that she believed in the existence of loch monsters, had been made, she now realised, more from a wishful thinking than from any strong conviction that the creatures were still extant. She found herself in a quandary. She had no pictorial evidence whatever of what she had seen, and, like so many other witnesses of phenomena, feared that she would not be believed, if all she could produce was a mere eye-witness account of the sighting, without a photograph to back her up.

Besides, the more she thought it over while making her way back to the tent, surveying the now unruffled surface of the loch, she herself began to doubt whether she really could have seen what she thought she had seen. By the time she got back to Phyllis she had almost convinced herself that the winking monster had been a figment of her imagination produced by the heavy weather, the demented shoal of fish and the panic flight of the buzzard.

She decided to try to find out, without asking a direct question, whether there was any support to be obtained from Phyllis who, even if she had not seen the creature itself, might have seen something which would support Sally's suppositions and resolve her doubts.

There was no help from that quarter, however. She found Phyllis fast asleep in the shade cast by the tent. She had spread a raincoat on the heather, was sprawled on it and was breathing heavily, obviously dead to the world.

‘Oh, Lord!’ said Sally aloud. It must be the effect of the sparkling burgundy which, against Lady Calshott's better judgment, Sir Humphrey had opened at lunch. She contemplated the slumbering girl with amusement, contempt and irritation nicely combined. Phyllis, she remembered, never had been able to drink more than a glass of anything stronger than shandy-gaff without feeling the effects of it to what appeared to others a disproportionate extent.

At the birthday party which Dame Beatrice had attended Phyllis's glass had been filled only once, this by Lady Calshott's orders. Sally had felt sorry for Phyllis at the time. She did not feel sorry for her now. If only Phyllis had been awake and on watch, what a story the two of them would have been able to tell, thought Sally. As it was, unless one of the others had seen something, Sally's story lacked any corroboration and might even, she realised with horror, be put down to that same bottle of sparkling burgundy which seemed to have laid Phyllis low.

There appeared to be little point in trying to arouse the sleeper, so Sally provided herself with a paperback and a chair, put her binoculars down beside her and settled for a peaceful afternoon. The book was not so absorbing that it distracted her mind unduly, and every few minutes she looked out over the water. She had no expectation, let alone hope, that the monster would put in a second appearance, but she thought that, if the boat party had anything to report, they might pay her another visit. Anything, she thought, to convince her that she had not dreamed the whole thing, but that she really had seen that blackish, snake-like head and neck, that wicked, opaque and winking large pale eye!

However, nobody came. At four o'clock Phyllis came round from the back of the tent and said,

'Oh, here you are! Did you have a good lunch?'

'Well, at any rate, *you* did!' said Sally sternly.

'Yes, I've been asleep,' said Phyllis. 'It was the burgundy. I was so sick and tired of Mummy's horribly boring food that I asked Daddy whether we couldn't have a drink to help it down. I knew he'd brought some wine because, back at the hotel, he gave each caravan a couple of bottles and told them to celebrate with it if we got a sighting. Mummy wasn't very keen on my having a drink, but I think Daddy was ever so pleased. He's keen on wine and he said a sparkling red wouldn't hurt anybody, and of course, it didn't, except to make me sleepy, but that's the heat as well, I think. I didn't know it could ever be so hot and close in Scotland.'

'I expect it will lead to rain. Well, off you go for your tea.'

'Bless you,' said Phyllis. 'What a bore it is to have to walk there and back, though. Don't you honestly think we could use your van?'

'Well, look,' said Sally, 'I'll tell you what.' She herself was beginning to tire of the walk in such weather as they were enjoying. 'If you'll do exactly as I say...'

'Oh, of course, Sally darling. You know I will.'

‘All right, then. When you get to the van you may drive it as far as Sir Humphrey’s caravan—that will save you a bit— and on the way back here you may leave it where the so-called road peters out. After that, the path is so rough and so narrow that I’m not risking either my tyres or of one of us sliding the van into the loch. All right?’

‘You really are a *lamb!*’ cried Phyllis. ‘I’ve always wanted to drive one of those things.’

This concession on Sally’s part had an unexpected result. Phyllis obeyed her instructions to the letter and Sally herself found the benefit, for the new arrangement halved the length of the walk, although the site which her van now occupied was not as attractive or as convenient as the one she had chosen originally. However, she was well pleased in most ways with the change and its manifest convenience, although Sir Humphrey demurred at an arrangement which, as he pointed out, would leave Sally even more alone at nights than the previous one had done.

Lady Calshott, who had been opposed to the first choice of site for Sally’s van, approved volubly of the new one.

‘It was all very well for Angela to have that long, rough walk to and fro,’ she said, ‘but I could tell that it was already proving too much for Phyllis. Angela is very tough mutton, as one may infer from this hill-climbing and hiking she seems to like so much. Phyllis, I’m afraid, is my poor, delicate, shorn little lamb, and I’m grateful to you, Sally, for your thoughtfulness.’

‘Well, really!’ exclaimed Miss Barton, who had returned to the caravan, as usual, for her supper. ‘I can imagine better ways of expressing oneself, Mildred. Mutton, indeed! Thank you *very* much for the compliment!’

Sally forbore to point out that it was Phyllis’s importunity and not her own good nature which had brought about the change of venue for the motorised caravan, but that night, when the evening meal was in its concluding stages, Sir Humphrey said,

‘My wife and I feel, Sally, that you’ve been rather let down over this business. The agreement was that you should use your van to act as liaison officer between the various parties and myself. Owing to Angela’s having altered her own arrangements since the scheme was first mooted, things have had to change, but now that you’ve been kind enough to let Phyllis move your van about, and so shorten the walk to and from your tent, my wife suggests that you and she should take turn and turn about with the watching or, alternatively, that you should pay daily visits to the other tents and caravans, once in the morning

and again just after tea, in case anyone has anything to report. Instead of your van, my wife and Phyllis could use our car. The only stipulation is that you shall be prepared for tent duty from seven until nine each evening, so that Mildred may return to this caravan to cook our evening meal. I myself can manage the lunches, as no cooking is involved. What do you say? Which would you prefer?’

‘Oh, the second arrangement, please,’ said Sally, ignoring a pleading look from Phyllis.

‘Begin tomorrow morning,’ said Sir Humphrey, ‘and then the rest of the day, until seven in the evening, is yours to do with as you please.’

‘And it will be lovely for Phyllis and me to be together again, darling, won’t it?’ said Lady Calshott, beaming at her daughter.

‘Yes, lovely, Mummy,’ said Phyllis, looking dejected.

‘Oh, just one thing,’ said Sir Humphrey. ‘How would Sally like to use my car for getting about, and leave you two the motorised caravan, what?’

‘Oh, no, thanks,’ said Sally, who had remembered a point of some importance. ‘I’d rather stick to the van, if you don’t mind, and for a very good reason. My van is all provisioned up, so that, if I get lost in the wilds, I’ve got sustenance. But I’ll walk to the village after breakfast, if you like, Sir Humphrey, and bring your car here for the others to use. How would that be?’

‘Excellent. Would you also call at the post-office to see whether there are any letters?’

‘I could do that,’ said Angela Barton. ‘I’m going there, anyway.’

‘Yes, but you wouldn’t want to walk back here with them and then go off on your travels,’ said Sir Humphrey, looking surprised at Angela’s offer. ‘Sally will pick up any correspondence for me, I’m sure.’

On the following morning, breakfast over, Sally left the van and almost pranced off across the bridge to return to the inn and pick up Sir Humphrey’s car and any letters.

She had barely crossed over the narrow stone bridge when she heard her name called. Turning, she saw Angela Barton following her. Politeness compelled her to wait until the sour little woman caught up with her, and they continued the walk side by side.

‘I’m expecting a letter,’ Angela explained, ‘so I thought I would call at the post-office, although not for Humphrey’s letters. Then, if you will give me a lift, I think I will ask Jeremy Tamworth to take me across the loch in that boat they have. He promised he would when I was at their caravan last time. I can begin my hike from there. According to the map, one should be able to reach the head

of the loch and then follow the river from that side. There seems to be some kind of road.'

'But how will you get back?' asked Sally, not that she wanted to know, but it seemed only civil to make some effort at conversation.

'Oh, not the same way, of course,' said Angela, who seemed unusually amiable that morning, 'but one can cut off northwards after about three miles. There is a bus route, I'm told, which will bring me near enough to Tannasgan.'

'The buses may be few and far between, don't you think?' asked Sally.

'I would be prepared to sit by the wayside and wait for a couple of hours, rather than take any more part in that ridiculous watching for the monster,' said Angela. 'There is no such creature.'

Sally had nothing to say in reply to this, and they went into the post-office together.

Sally had already heard from Laura and hoped that this time there might be a letter from her parents or her grandmother. The type-written envelope was from Hampshire. That meant either Laura or Dame Beatrice. She put it into her handbag and noted that Angela had also been handed a letter which, in her turn, she tucked away to read later. There was no mail for Sir Humphrey.

They reached the inn yard, picked up Sir Humphrey's Ford and Sally drove back to his caravan, accompanied, after all, by Angela.

'Can I give you a lift anywhere?' she asked Angela, as she was about to walk to her own van.

'Oh, I may as well come with you to see what the others are up to,' Angela ungraciously replied.

'Any excuse for a nasty little bit of snooping, I suppose,' thought Sally. 'OK. Get in,' she said.

They by-passed the first caravan and then its tent, and moved on to the second caravan which was situated about two miles further on. There she and Angela got out and Sally walked up to the caravan and hammered on the door. To her great surprise, it was not one of the young people who materialised, but Major Tamworth in pyjamas and dressing-gown and wearing overnight stubble on his cheeks and chin.

'Good heavens!' he exclaimed. 'What's all that noise about?'

'Visiting rounds,' said Sally briskly. 'Anything to report, Major?'

'Of course there isn't. What should there be to report?'

'Well, there are rumours of a brief sighting. It happened yesterday afternoon. We wondered whether you had any confirmation of it, but, of course, I didn't

expect to find you up here. We thought you were still at Site Two.'

'Oh, those youngsters wanted a change, and I wasn't averse to it myself, so we swapped over yesterday afternoon. All using sleeping-bags, so no problem about changing the bedding, as my wife pointed out.'

'I see. And you haven't any news for me to take back to Sir Humphrey? You didn't see anything yesterday?'

'Certainly not. Far too busy swapping caravans yesterday to fool about looking for monsters.'

'What about Godiva and Winfrith?'

'Getting the breakfast. They'd have squealed soon enough if there was anything to squeal about.'

'Who is going to handle the boat now that the three boys have gone?'

'Handle it myself, with a bit of help in shoving off. Disgracefully muddy, these banks. Going to do a bit of fishing, as a matter of fact.'

'So what about the camera up at the shooting lodge?'

'So what about it? I shall ferry the Benson girls over, of course, whether they like it or not. They've had the use of the caravan so far. Now they can take on the lodge.'

'And you'll ferry me, too, I hope,' said Angela Barton.

'Why you?' snorted the major. 'Thought you'd given up the job. Been out on your tod these last few days, haven't you? Spotted you through my binoculars. Run into trouble on some of these hills if you're not careful. A woman of your age ain't a giddy goat, you know.'

'I leave it to you older men to behave like goats,' said Angela.

There was such a degree of meaningful malice in her tone that even Sally, who knew Angela's reputation, was astonished. She was equally surprised by the major's reaction.

'Only meant I'd spotted you when I was on watch at that damn' tent, don't you know,' he said humbly.

'Oh, well,' said Sally hastily, 'if there's nothing to report, I'll be moving on. What about it, Angela? Are you going to stay here until the major is ready to take you across?'

'Oh, I'll explore around,' said Angela. 'Perhaps I won't cross here, after all. I'll probably go as far as the stream at the head of the loch. The weather has been so dry that there's very little water coming down. I may be able to get across the stream by wading.'

'You *are* intrepid,' said Sally. 'All right, then, I'll be off.'

‘Had your breakfast, I suppose?’ said the major, indicating a half-hearted offer of hospitality. ‘Not that I know whether there’s enough for two more,’ he added, as the fragrant smell of frying bacon was becoming increasingly insistent.

‘Had mine *hours* ago, thanks,’ said Sally. ‘See you at supper, Angela.’ Angela went on her chosen way. Sally walked to the van, reversed it to a turning-place and drove back to what had been, originally, the major’s caravan. On the way to it she passed the tent, until recently the watching-point, supposedly, from which the major and his wife had operated, but Sally did not even trouble to stop the van and get out. It was clear that the tent was untenanted and its camera unmanned.

At the caravan she saw Marjorie Parris. Marjorie had imported, it seemed, a miniature rotating clothes-drier. She had stuck into the soft soil the end of the stick from which its rails depended and, as Sally drove up, she descended the steps of the caravan carrying what proved to be a limp, wet collection of two see-through blouses, two pairs of tights and a pale pink brassière. These she proceeded to arrange on the drier.

‘And wash their filthy shirts and socks I will not,’ she said, as Sally came up. ‘They can go dip them in the loch if they want to, but I’m not touching the beastly things. Goodness! I’m nothing but a squaw as it is! Where would I be if I took in three men’s washing as well?’

‘There’s a woman in the village who’ll do it,’ said Sally. ‘Sir Humphrey took ours to her cottage yesterday.’

‘How come you’re playing hooky?’

‘I’m on visiting rounds again. Did any of your lot see anything yesterday? I’m supposed to take back a report.’

‘My dear girl, we were moving house. We didn’t have a chance to see anything.’

‘Surely it didn’t take you all day? This was just after lunch. A lot of fish in the loch went mad, and then there was this glimpse of the monster.’

‘Oh, rot! Somebody was tight,’ said Marjorie. ‘We were tight ourselves, as a matter of fact—well, call it a weeny bit sloshed. You see, to make the move, we really had to have transport, so we made Nigel slog it to the village and bring out our estate car. Then we loaded up and brought all our stuff *here*, and the major’s lot loaded up and took their stuff *there*, and Nigel had the forethought to stack up with some canned beer from the pub, and we all had a drink and a good rest after our labours.’

‘A good *sleep*, I suppose you mean,’ said Sally.

‘We may have closed our eyes, yes. Don’t your lot drink anything but tea, then?’

‘We did knock back a couple of bottles of sparkling burgundy,’ admitted Sally. ‘It sent Phyllis to sleep, too, as a matter of fact.’

‘Well, there you are, then. She dreamt the whole thing. I wouldn’t put anything past Phyllis, even a sighting of the monster, when she’s had a couple of stoups of wine.’

‘As a matter of fact, it wasn’t Phyllis...’

‘Don’t tell me it was Angela! Was she tight, too? Who’s this woman who takes in washing? Sounds just the thing to help me out.’

‘A Mrs MacIntyre. Anyone will tell you which is her cottage.’

So that was how everybody was going to take her story, if she told it, thought Sally. She decided not to tell it. She went back to the van, started it up and drove back to the village. Mrs McLauchlin was standing at the door of the inn. Sally, who was driving slowly, pulled up and got out. Mrs McLauchlin beamed at her.

‘Nae doubt you’ll have come for your breakfast,’ she said.

‘No, I had it ages ago,’ said Sally. ‘You’re not open yet, I suppose? I could do with a drink.’

‘Wha’s tae fash about the licensing laws oot here? Come ben,’ said the hospitable innkeeper’s wife. ‘Losh! Gin a body havered the like, whaur wud oor profits be?’ She led the way into the bar and called for Jock. ‘Sairve the young leddy,’ she said, ‘but no the shepherds’ whusky, mind ye!’

A tousle-haired servitor appeared. He grinned at his employer and said to Sally,

‘Whit way wad ye be speirin’ for a dram at this ’oor, lassie?’

‘No business of yours, ye Gorbals...!’ said Mrs McLauchlin, with trenchant sternness. ‘Juist sairve the young leddy and hae din wi’ your gommeril craiks!’

‘Whit’ll it be, then?’ asked the lad sullenly.

‘What’s wrong with the shepherds’ whisky?’ asked Sally, not that she wanted it, but the question was inevitable under the circumstances. The youth glanced at his employer.

‘Och, that!’ said Mrs McLauchlin, laughing. ‘It’s juist that we’ll be a wee thing short the morn’s morn, and I’ll be finding it hard tae saitisfy the lads when they come in tae their dinner.’

‘Oh, well, I wasn’t going to ask for it, anyway,’ said Sally. ‘I don’t like whisky. You wouldn’t have cider, by any chance?’

‘Cider? Och, no. There’s nae ca’ for it hereabouts. Ye can get a shandy-gaff



or juist the ale or the lemonade. Wull ane o' them dae for ye?'

'A shandy, then, please.' Sally paid for her drink. Mrs McLauchlin went behind the bar, sat down on a stool and looked prepared for conversation.

'And hoo is the auld yin getting on wi' his monster?' she asked.

'It's early days yet,' replied Sally, determined not to be drawn into admitting to such a convinced sceptic that she herself had had a sighting. 'By the way, I'm rather intrigued by the situation of the empty hunting-lodge and that ruined cottage above the loch. Is there no access to them except by boat? Can't they be reached by road?'

'There's a road, but I doubt it's overgrown the noo. Gin ye tak' the road oot o' the clachan the far side the toun, ye'll likely see a signpost, gin it's still there, but ye'll not get your wee van alang there, I'll be thinking. Lang syne that way was in use. It'll no be ony guid the day.'

Sally finished her drink and went out to the van. She had to report back to Sir Humphrey, but, after that, the day, within limits, was her own. It amused her to hear Tannasgan referred to as a town. She could only suppose that the seaside holiday-makers, if there were any, were responsible for conferring this dignity upon it, or else the hamlet beyond it was so insignificant as to make Tannasgan seem large by comparison.

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## CHAPTER 10

### The Body at the Crofter's Cottage

‘Unhouseled. disappointed, unaneled.’

*William Shakespeare.*



(1)

When Sally arrived back, there was nobody at, or in, Sir Humphrey's caravan. Lady Calshott and Phyllis were already on duty at the tent, Sally supposed, but Sir Humphrey had left a note pinned on the caravan door.

*Sally. Please write report, if any, on bottom of this sheet.* A pencil on a piece of string dangled from a second drawing-pin. Without detaching it, Sally, after a glance at her watch, wrote down the time and added, *Major and Nigel have switched caravans. No sightings.* Then she drove back to Tannasgan and along a narrow road which led to the hamlet mentioned by Mrs McLauchlin.

This was nothing more than a very small fishing village. Once past it, the road, not much more than single track, began to wind upwards among the hills. The lower slopes were covered with bracken and heather, the latter just beginning to show patches of pink cross-leaved heath on the boggy, roadside stretches, with the deep-coloured purple heather dyeing the upper slopes. The bracken, still young, was brilliantly green and, again near the road, there were tufts of white-headed cotton-grass. Here and there stood a solitary silver birch, but, in the distance and up on the hill-slopes, there were dark pine-woods below the bare and sharply-outlined high tops and their shadowed corries.

Sally drove at a leisurely thirty-five miles an hour, met nothing on the road and enjoyed the peace, the scenery and the sense of personal freedom. The serpentine road wound on and mounted all the time, the van ran sweetly and Sally began to sing. For the first fifteen miles there was no sign of a turning and she wondered whether she had missed the one mentioned by Mrs McLauchlin, although she felt that it mattered little or nothing if such was the case. It was sufficient to be her own mistress, travelling in comfort and alone. Before her, but

so far in the distance that their colour was the blackish-blue of slate, rose a mountain range, peak behind peak.

The road skirted a small ravine and a stone-built, humped-backed bridge took the car across a little, tumbling stream. On the further side of the bridge there was a roadside patch of grass. Sally pulled up, got out and tested the grass to make sure that it was firm enough to take the van. Satisfied, she drove on to it and decided to eat her lunch. The van was well-stocked, but a simple meal of wheaten crispbread and some cheese suited her fancy, with an orange to follow.

A mile further on, she came to a signpost at narrow crossroads. She took the right-hand fork. The gradients grew steeper and the road wound and curved so abruptly that the mountain range seemed now to be on one side of her and now on the other. Soon she was passing through the pine forest and then, when the trees were left behind, she could see in the valley on her right the gleam of water and was sure that she was looking down on the Loch of the Ghost, Loch na Tannasg itself.

Soon after this, the track-like road began to slope slightly downhill. It took a long curve to the right and straightened out again high above the banks of a small stream which here ran in a miniature gorge. Sally supposed it to be the same water which she had crossed previously before she turned off into the hills. The road ran fairly level for the next few miles and Sally had long since lost sight of the glinting loch when she saw what she had been hoping for, another turning which might possibly lead down to it. She was again facing the mountains, this time those which, beforetime, had seemed to her to foregather at the head of the loch behind its feeder river and the last solitary island on which stood the ruined priory.

A quarter of a mile down this little turning the trackway narrowed until it would no longer take the width of the van. Moreover, it was partly overgrown with bracken, gorse and heather. Sally backed the van with great caution until she had parked it safely, then she took up a walking stick, got out, locked the van and set off on foot down what proved to be a steep and difficult slope. Soon she found herself among low-growing silver birches and great stretches of fox-gloves and rose-bay willow-herb. Still the path, such as it was (only barely discernible), wound downwards and she began to get more glimpses of the loch.

The pale-blue sky by this time had disappeared. Great black clouds, heavy with rain, had moved up and there was an ominous roll of thunder in the distance. Sally was in two minds whether to turn back. Her walking-shoes were stout enough, but she had no mackintosh and was wearing crimplene trousers

and a thin shirt. However, the loch now came in full sight and, stopping to make a reconnaissance, she judged that she must be getting near the tumbledown cottage, once inhabited by crofters, which stood above the deserted hunting-lodge.

The wayside bones of a long-dead sheep confirmed this judgment, so she pressed on and, as the first few heavy drops of rain presaged the approaching storm, comforted herself with the assurance that, at any rate, she was on the way to some sort of shelter. At the next turn of the now almost obliterated path she saw her goal, and, at the same moment, there was a flash of lightning and a startling peal of thunder. Regardless of the hazards underfoot, Sally began to run. She stumbled often and once went down full length, but the tough, high-growing, springy heather broke her fall and she scrambled up and almost beat the rain which, as she flung herself into the doorless cottage, descended in vicious, slanting spears which cut at her thin shirt like cold knives.

The cottage was nothing more than a but-and-ben. Fortunately the doorless opening gave on to what had been the living-quarters and here the roof was almost intact. The room, however, was no longer untenanted. On the earthen floor lay the body of Angela Barton. Beside her was a thermos flask, its metal cup a little distance away, where presumably, it had dropped from the woman's hand as she fell.

The horrified Sally did not know what to do. Gingerly she touched a dead hand and found it cold but not yet stiff. She straightened up and forced herself to memorise the scene and the position and appearance of the corpse. Angela had never had any pretensions to physical beauty. Hers was a sardonic little face and now its habitual expression was emphasised by a fixed and horrid smile, the *risus sardonicus* (although Sally did not know this at the time) symptomatic of poisoning by strychnine.

Angela's was the first dead body Sally had ever seen. She had been accustomed to think of death in terms of majesty and austere beauty, but Angela's body was meagre, ugly and repellent, and the horrible grin on her face was a commentary (Sally felt) and a clue. She was right enough in thinking so. It was a commentary, and not a nattering one, upon Angela's nature when she had been alive. It was also a clue as to the manner of her death.

Two other things, one horrifying, the other puzzling, struck Sally. There was a deep wound in the throat of the corpse, raw, dark red and nauseating to the beholder. That was the horrifying matter. The puzzling one was that the body was wet through; not rain-wet, Sally shudderingly realised, but the clothing and

hair were as sodden as though they had been immersed in the loch.

Beside the body were an empty envelope and the letter which, presumably, had been contained in it. These were perfectly dry. Sally remembered that Angela had called for a letter at the post-office, so, in view of the circumstances in which she found herself, she picked up the letter and read it.

‘Oh, Lord!’ she said aloud. She replaced the letter on the floor as near as possible to the spot from which she had picked it up. It bore the signature of Esmond Chester and stated that the writer had made ‘other arrangements, probably of a permanent nature,’ and no longer required the services of a housekeeper. ‘But as you are not in such a position as to require to earn your living,’ the letter continued, ‘I trust that my plans will not affect our cordial relationship, but that you will feel free to visit the vicarage as before and continue your invaluable work for the parish.’

Sally walked to the doorway. There was nothing to be done for Angela. That was clear. There remained the necessity of reporting the death and getting help in removing the body to a more suitable resting-place.

The rain, however, was still pouring down and the heavens were black, although the thunder was now no more than a distant muttering and the lightning flashes were infrequent. Sally had not spotted the hunting-lodge on her precipitous dash for the shelter of the cottage, but that was her obvious port of call, since two of the watchers (Godiva and Winfrith presumably, if the major had had his way) must be posted on duty and would be taking shelter from the rain.

On the other hand, little though she liked sharing the cottage with a corpse, Sally did not want to get soaked through, since she still had a considerable distance to drive before she could get back to the inn and, with any luck, beg a hot bath from the good-natured Mrs McLauchlin. She had a change of clothes and towels in the van, it was true, but the prospect of dripping all over the floor and then of having the problem of drying her present outfit did not appeal to her in the slightest degree.

‘I’ll stick it out for a bit, in case the rain stops,’ she thought, and was encouraged, as she stood in the doorway with her back to the corpse, to see an edging of primrose over the nearest hills. Gradually the rain lessened, so, although the sky still looked somewhat threatening, Sally decided to try her luck in locating the hunting-lodge and sharing her uncomfortable knowledge with others of her party.

She had less than a quarter of a mile to go, but the going was rough, steeply

downhill and soakingly wet under foot. However, there was the hunting-lodge, uncompromisingly grim, and in it were the Bensons. They were understandably surprised to see Sally and also understandably unwilling to accompany her to the cottage.

‘Look,’ said Godiva, always the leading spirit of the two, ‘if the poor thing is dead, there is nothing we can do for her, is there? Well, we’re going back to the caravan—both of us, I may say...’

‘Leaving nobody here on watch?’ asked Sally.

‘My dear soul,’ said Godiva, irritated, ‘what monster, if there is one, which I very much doubt, is going to surface after a thunderstorm? There won’t be anything to see, you may be sure of that. Also, let Major Tamworth rage as he will, neither Winfrith nor myself has the smallest intention of rowing across to this place again, ever. You had better come over with us and report what you have found. The sooner the Calshotts know about it, the better.’

‘I can’t do that,’ said Sally. ‘I’ve left my van up the road. But, look, I do wish you’d walk up to the cottage with me and confirm that Angela is lying there.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Godiva. ‘That will be quite unnecessary. You would hardly have made up such a story. The only thing to confirm is why she did it.’

Sally saw the force of this and gave in. She squelched her way back to her van, reversed up the difficult path, turned at the top of it and drove back to the village and from there to Sir Humphrey’s caravan.

## (2)

By the time Sally had told her story to the Calshotts the rain had stopped, the storm had passed over and the loch was shrouded in mist. To her astonishment, although the Calshotts expressed horror, it was nothing more than a decent offering of lip-service to her news; neither did any of them appear to be surprised.

‘Angela was always a misfit,’ said Phyllis.

‘Of course, the letter you mention tipped the poor girl over the edge, I suppose,’ said Sir Humphrey.

‘I suppose we have to tell the local police,’ said Lady Calshott. ‘What a nuisance! I believe their procedures are entirely different from our own.’

‘I had better go and identify the body, I suppose, before I call them. You will have to accompany me, Sally. I have no idea of how to reach the cottage from the road and in this mist I don’t relish the idea of taking the boat across the loch to get to it,’ said Sir Humphrey.

‘I wonder whether Godiva and Winfrith managed to get across in the boat?’ said Sally. ‘How will you contact the police? Is there a bobby in Tannasgan?’

‘Oh, I shall ring up Glasgow. I don’t believe there is a local fellow. I know the Glasgow people. Besides, it’s always best to start at the top of the tree. One cuts out all the dead wood that way,’ replied Sir Humphrey. Sally tried to visualise this procedure and, in spite of the seriousness of the situation, found herself giggling.

‘There is nothing funny, I should have thought, about poor Angela’s death,’ said Lady Calshott frigidly.

‘I’m sorry.’ Sally restored herself to gravity. ‘It was only the way Sir Humphrey put it.’

‘Well,’ said he, ‘we had better make a start for this cottage of yours. The sooner the business is in official hands the better. I think we’ll take my car, Sally. It is probably faster than your van.’

‘I think,’ said Sally boldly, ‘that you ought to get in touch with the police at once. Then we can guide them to the cottage as soon as they arrive.’

‘Something in that, perhaps. Very well. I’ll go to the post-office straight away and telephone MacIver from there. I have his home address and must just hope he’ll be there to take the call. I’ll arrange to meet his people at the pub. You’d better come with me, Sally. You’ll still be needed as a guide, I expect. I’ll buy you a drink while we’re waiting for the police to come.’ It was just over two hours after Sir Humphrey had made his telephone call before the police arrived. He and Sally had been served with drinks in the small lounge which was ordinarily kept for residents at the inn and had been asked whether they would have dinner. Sally was hungry, for her snack lunch, although satisfying at the time, now seemed to belong to a remote past. Sir Humphrey, however, did not wish the police to arrive in the middle of a meal and so declined an offer which Sally would have liked to accept, and they sat on until at last an inspector, the police doctor, a photographer and a fingerprint officer arrived and were conducted to the ruined cottage where Angela Barton’s body was lying on the earthen floor. Although the rain had ceased, the sky was still sullen with cloud-rack. The burn which flowed under the little stone bridge seemed twice its previous width and, alongside the rough hill-road which led eventually to the last turning to the cottage, it was in lusty, noisy spate, gurgling and splashing a tumultuous, gleeful way towards the sea.

Arrived at the cottage, they all went inside. It was rather dark, for the one window in the place was tiny. Sally, having delivered the goods, so to speak,

walked over soaking wet ground to the hunting-lodge. There was no sign of Godiva or Winfrith, so apparently they had carried out their plan of taking the boat across the loch and had managed this before the mist thickened. She went back to Sir Humphrey's car, from which she had guided the police car on its way to the cottage, and sat in it, smoking cigarettes to assuage her hunger, until the party was ready to go home.

Before the police re-entered their car, however, the inspector came out of the cottage and asked permission to sit beside Sally. She gave it, realising that she was going to be questioned. The sergeant followed, took the back seat and produced a notebook.

'You had been given the day to yourself?' said the gentle Scottish voice. 'Why was that, then?'

'There were enough people to do the watching. I am here to act as liaison officer between the various parties.'

'And what made you bring your car up here to this out-of-the-way spot?'

'I felt sure there must be a road to the croft and the hunting-lodge. I asked at the inn and this was confirmed, so I took the trip, that's all.'

'I see. When did you last see the deceased alive?'

'This morning. We walked to the post-office together to collect any letters, went back to the caravan and then I drove her in my van as far along the south side of the loch as she wanted to go—as far, in fact, as the road permitted—and then I made my calls and reported back to Sir Humphrey's caravan. After that I was free and I drove up here and—well—and...'

'Found the body. Aye, that was the way of it, then. Did the deceased give you anything of her thoughts as to how she proposed to spend her day?'

'She said at first that she would get some of the others to row her across the loch, I think, but I believe she changed her mind and thought she would hike as far as the head of the loch and trust to wading across the little river, which is very shallow, I believe and, until we had the storm this afternoon, not very swift or very wide.'

'Aha. Now, we found a letter beside the body.'

'Yes. I—I read it. I suppose I ought not to have touched it.'

'Och, it was only natural that you should. Well, I think that is all, Miss Lestrangle. The puir woman had taken poison, of course, having first attempted to gash her throat and mebbe there was an attempt at drooning hersel'. The contents of the flask, such as remain—not all was spilt on the floor—and the dregs, if any, in the wee tin cup, will be analysed, of course, but I'm free to tell



you that we shall advise the Fiscal of a clear case of suicide while the balance of the mind was disturbed by that letter you read. Would you have any idea how old the puir body would have been?’

‘I believe somebody—Sir Humphrey’s daughter I expect it was—told me that she was forty-five.’

‘And unmarried?’

‘Yes.’

‘And she was expecting to be employed by this minister of the kirk as his housekeeper?’

‘I believe she was already so employed, but was taking her holiday while the vicar had his.’

‘What did the letter mean when it mentioned that the puir lady did not need to earn money?’

‘Sir Humphrey might be able to tell you that. I take it to mean that she had a private income. In fact, I was told that she was rather well off.’

‘Do you suppose she had the thought of marriage in her mind?’

‘I have heard it suggested and, if the letter made her commit suicide, I suppose she must have considered it possible that the vicar would eventually marry her. It’s pretty obvious that the letter put paid to any such idea.’

(3)

‘Of course poor old Angela was planning to marry the vicar,’ said Phyllis, as the party sat down to dinner at nine o’clock that night. ‘I say, Sally, hasn’t it made you rather scared about sleeping alone in your van tonight?’

‘Good heavens, no. Why should it?’ asked Sally.

‘Oh, I just wondered whether you’d care to have me join you?’

‘I shall be perfectly all right, thanks.’

‘Well, I only hope I don’t dream about poor old Angela. You don’t believe in ghosts, Sally, do you?’

‘Only sort of.’

‘Yes, that’s how *I* feel. If you won’t have me in your van— although I think you’re very dog-in-the-manger about it— you wouldn’t share my cabin with me, would you?’

‘And sleep in Angela’s bed? If you don’t mind, I would very much rather not.’

‘Oh, well!’

‘Your father and I have decided that you will have his bed and he will take

yours, darling,' said Lady Calshott. 'Men are much less imaginative than women when it comes to supping off horrors, as the saying goes.'

Sally retired to her van at ten and locked herself in before she undressed. Instead of driving further towards the tent before she parked, she had taken the van only about fifty yards from the caravan. She needed to occupy her mind with practical matters, so before she went to sleep she had time to wonder what Sir Humphrey's plans were. Once the Procurator-Fiscal was satisfied that Angela's death was a straightforward suicide, she supposed that, so far as the Calshotts were concerned, the expedition would be called off and the body taken back for burial. In that case, she decided that she herself would return to the comfort of her grandmother's Stone House at Wandles Parva on the edge of the New Forest, for the discovery of the body had been a severe shock, as she was beginning to realise. When she *did* fall asleep, her dreams were horrifying.

On the following morning at breakfast she said to Sir Humphrey, 'Does—well, does Angela make any difference to the expedition?'

'I've been thinking it over,' he replied. 'I really suppose we had better call everything off, at any rate for a time. I am Angela's executor and there will be her affairs to settle up, for one thing. For another, well, my wife and Phyllis are not too keen to carry on.'

'I want a word with the vicar,' stated Lady Calshott determinedly. 'I cannot imagine how he could bring himself to write such a cruel letter. He might at least have waited until we got home, and then have broken the news of Angela's dismissal gently and kindly to her. After all, it is not as though she had planned to spend the whole two months up here with us. She would have been going home today or, at the latest, tomorrow. Why could he not have waited that short time?'

'I suppose it was easier to dismiss her by letter than face to face. That is always so embarrassing,' said Phyllis. 'Even with servants it is embarrassing, let alone somebody who is expecting to be your wife.'

'I have never found the dismissal of servants an embarrassment,' said Lady Calshott. 'After all, they must have proved to be unsatisfactory, or they would not need to be told to go. Anyway, I am surprised at Mr Chester, and most displeased with him, and I shall not hesitate to tell him so.'

'What about today?' asked Sally. 'Do we take up our watch as usual?'

'Oh, hardly,' Sir Humphrey replied. 'The police may need us and, if we all remain here, they will know where to find us. You might do visiting rounds again, Sally, if you will, and tell those who do not know of it that Angela has left

us.'

'I expect Godiva and Winfrith will have spread the news,' said Sally. 'I visited them at the hunting-lodge yesterday afternoon and told them what had happened.'

'I wonder whether they saw anything of Angela? They may have ferried her over there,' said Phyllis. 'But what a queer place for her to choose for her picnic! One would suppose that she would have preferred to eat out of doors. And then to kill herself! But, of course, she always had a morbid streak in her.'

'There was no sign of food,' said Sally, 'but I suppose she must have taken some with her, although I thought...' She broke off. Lady Calshott, who had discovered that a wasp was investigating the breakfast jar of marmalade, was paying no attention, Phyllis was pouring another cup of coffee for her father, and Sir Humphrey himself was applying himself assiduously to his breakfast. Sally was conscious of tension in the air. They were determined, for some reason, not to listen to her.

'Good heavens!' she thought. 'They don't believe it *was* suicide! Come to that, neither do I!' She rose from her seat at the table. 'Well, I think I'd better get going on my rounds,' she said. 'I'll be back here as soon as I can. If the police want to speak to anybody, it will most likely be me again, I should suppose.'

'Yes, you run along, dear,' said Lady Calshott. 'On the way, would you telephone my housekeeper to say that we shall be home in a day or two, so she must have everything in readiness?'

'No, I'll do that,' said Sir Humphrey. 'I have to telephone Glasgow anyway, to tell MacIver that we are staying put in case his people want to see us again. I must make enquiries, too, as to when we shall be able to take poor Angela home. There were arrangements to take her to the mortuary for the body to be more thoroughly examined, but I hope the Fiscal will be reasonable and not hold matters up. MacIver may have influence with him and I believe it is up to him to decide whether there is a case to go to the Sheriff. I anticipate no trouble of that kind, though. The wretched affair is straightforward enough, I'm afraid. It is all very unfortunate, but...'

'I should have thought the vicar could have done with Angela's money,' said Lady Calshott, pursuing her own train of thought. 'It's a very poor living, you know.'

'A bit of luck for us he didn't want the money,' said Phyllis. 'Anyway, he won't get it now.'

‘Unless Angela has left a foolish will,’ said Lady Calshott, ‘and *that* would occasion me no surprise whatever.’

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## CHAPTER 11

### Two Letters for Dame Beatrice

‘However, sir, here is a guarantee. Look at its contents; I do not again carry the letters of Uriah.’

*Sir Walter Scott.*



(1)

Visiting rounds, that morning, left Sally with some very curious and interesting impressions, but did nothing to alter her overwhelming conviction that Angela Barton’s death had not been caused by suicide. Since it was hardly conceivable that it had been accidental, there was only one conclusion which seemed to fit the facts.

Sir Humphrey had made no suggestions as to how she should refer to the death when she made her rounds, so, at the first caravan, now in possession of the Parrises, Hubert Pring and Jeremy Tarn worth, she said to Marjorie, who seemed to be the only person awake, and who was standing just outside the caravan emptying a teapot, ‘I suppose you’ve heard about Angela Barton?’

‘Gone home, has she?’

‘Oh, you haven’t heard, then?’

‘Heard what?’

‘I thought the Bensons might have walked over here and told you.’

‘Told us what? Is Angela lost or ill or something?’

‘Oh, Marjorie, she’s dead!’

‘*Dead?* You’re not being funny, are you?’

‘No.’

‘But she *can*’t be dead! How do you know? I mean, she was all right yesterday, wasn’t she?’

‘Yes. We think she’s taken poison.’

‘Good God! You don’t mean that!’

‘I’m afraid so, yes. Will you tell the others?’

‘I suppose so. But how on earth did it happen?’

‘We don’t know yet. It’s in the hands of the police.’

‘The police? Oh, well, I suppose it would have to be. Not that they can do anything. Shall we all be involved, do you think? I mean, will there be an inquest? Have to be some sort of enquiry, I suppose.’

‘I’ve no idea what will happen. I don’t think the procedure up here is the same as it is at home.’

‘Are the Calshotts very cut up about it?’

‘No, not really. Worried, of course, and shocked, but—well, no, not cut up. At least, I wouldn’t say so.’

‘Angela wasn’t terribly likeable, poor thing. Do you think she found out she’d got a serious illness, and that made her do it? Personally, I’d never have the courage. Besides, there’s always a sporting chance of one’s recovering, isn’t there? I mean, the hospitals nowadays...’

‘Well, I must push on,’ said Sally. ‘No use asking whether you’ve seen anything of the monster, I suppose? That’s my other reason for coming round.’

‘Save your strength, dear. We’ve seen nothing except yesterday’s storm. Don’t expect to, either. Matter of fact, except for Hubert, who wants to stick it out for another week or so, this particular outfit is talking of toddling home.’

‘You won’t go until the thing about Angela is all cleared up, though, will you?’

‘Can’t see what difference that makes. It’s nothing to do with us. If anybody has to stick around and make arrangements, it will be the Calshotts.’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ said Sally uncomfortably. ‘All the same...’

‘Oh, you mean we ought to show proper respect. Well, I didn’t respect Angela when she was alive, and I don’t see any reason to respect her now she’s dead. I’ll tell you one thing, though. I never would have thought she’d do for herself. Nigel being a vet, we meet some queer types—you know, fanatical animal lovers, barmy old maids, hysterical middle-class not-enough-to-do types, and people who believe animals have souls or have been reincarnated or something—the lot! You can’t imagine! Why, some of them think more of their pets than they do of their children.’

‘It must be very interesting,’ said Sally weakly.

‘Interesting? It takes the patience of Job to cope with it all at times! What I mean is that there wasn’t anything exactly *potty* about Angela Barton. She was mean and sneaky, a busybody and a mischief-maker, but I’m positive she wasn’t the type to kill herself.’

‘She’d had a letter, you know.’

‘Blackmail? Poison pen?’

‘Oh, no, nothing like that. It was just—I don’t suppose it matters if I tell you, because it will all come out later. It was from the vicar to tell her he didn’t need her as housekeeper any more.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I found her. The letter was on the floor. I read it.’

‘You *found* her? Oh, Sally, how awful for you! You come right inside and I’ll make you a cup of coffee.’

‘No, really, thanks.’

‘With a shot of brandy?’

‘No, honestly. I must be getting along.’

‘Who the devil are you nattering to, Margie?’ shouted an irritated voice. ‘Bring whoever it is inside and shut that damned door. Oh, it’s you again, Sally. Do you ever go to bed?’

‘It’s nearly nine o’clock, Nigel,’ said Marjorie. ‘And Sally has news. You know poor old Angela Barton? Well, she’s done herself in. Poisoned herself. Sally found the body.’

Nigel, sweaty, tousled and wearing nothing but a pair of pyjama trousers, scratched his chest, blinked and said, ‘When?’

‘Yesterday afternoon,’ replied Sally.

‘Where?’

‘In that broken-down cottage up above the hunting-lodge. I was caught in the storm and went there for shelter, and there she was, lying on the floor.’

‘Poor old you!’ said Nigel. ‘Was it all bluggy?’

‘Oh, Nigel, *don’t!*’ cried Marjorie.

‘She’d taken poison, it’s thought,’ said Sally, ‘and she’d got a wound in her throat, but I don’t think it had bled—well, anyway, not very much.’

‘Poison? Who says so?’

‘Well, the police have been called.’

‘What kind of poison?’

‘Oh, what does that matter!’ cried his wife. ‘The poor thing is dead. What difference does any particular poison make?’

‘It might matter if it was something *I’ve* got,’ said Nigel. ‘They might think I’d supplied her with it.’

‘*You?*’ exclaimed Sally, astonished by the line the conversation was taking.

‘Vet,’ said Nigel laconically. ‘I always have a supply of poison—strychnine,

for example—same as doctors and some experimental scientists. Need it for our work. So do mole-catchers, incidentally. All others would have quite a job getting hold of it, I can tell you. Not that it takes much to put a body to sleep. Half a grain will do the trick. Of course we're only allowed to use it as an ingredient in medicine. The 1962 Act put an end to its use as a lethal dose for your pet—or your pet aversion. Even *my* supply is limited. Cruelty to animals, you see. It's a frightful death, if it's what I think it is. You go into convulsions, arch yourself nearly into a hoop, froth at the mouth and turn blue. If Angela chose that way out, she has my sympathy.'

'I'd better be going,' said Sally, who was feeling sick. 'Will you tell the other two? Everybody had better know what's happened, and I've still got to see the Tamworths and the Bensons.'

'Angela Barton dead? Poisoned herself? Good God!' exclaimed Major Tamworth predictably. 'Heaven bless my soul, whatever next?'

'Some sort of enquiry, I suppose,' said Sally.

'Wretched woman must have been off her head!'

'Suicides always are. I mean, they must be, or they wouldn't do it,' said Winfrith Benson, with a glance at her more formidable sister.

'Unless their honour is involved,' said Godiva prudishly. 'In that case, to put an end to things is the only decent way out.'

'But that would only apply to men,' said Catherine Tamworth. 'Women do not have that kind of honour, only the other kind, and even *that* is very unfashionable nowadays.'

'Really, Kitty!' exclaimed her husband. 'We don't want the Permissive Society brought to the breakfast table! Had yours, I suppose?' he added to Sally, in his usual hospitable manner.

'Oh, yes, of course, thank you,' she replied. 'Would you mind telling me when was the last time you saw Angela?'

'Why, when you left here yesterday. There was some idea that these Benson girls would take her across the loch, wasn't there?' demanded the major.

'She changed her mind,' said Godiva, 'and we didn't go across until after lunch because the major commandeered the boat to go fishing.'

'Oh, ah, yes, so I did,' the major agreed. 'I'd forgotten all about it. Didn't get a bite, that's why.'

'And you saw nothing of her later?' asked Sally, turning to Godiva.

'Nothing at all. She walked towards the head of the loch and said she would wade across the river. Why?'



‘Because, as you know, I found her in that ruined cottage above the hunting-lodge. You were in the lodge yesterday, so I just wondered whether you might have seen something more of her after she left you the first time.’

‘We were down on the shores of the loch until the storm broke,’ said Godiva. ‘Then we took shelter in the lodge and came back here as soon as we could. We saw nothing more of Angela. I’m sorry we wouldn’t go with you to the cottage, but really the storm, and getting back in the boat, took all our energy.’

‘Horrid,’ said Winfrith. ‘It was misty and the boat was half full of water. We had to bail out before we could launch it.’

‘Nothing else to report, I take it? No sightings, or anything unusual?’ asked Sally.

‘I should have thought Angela Barton’s death was sufficiently unusual for one day,’ said the major. ‘Calshott want any help of any sort, do you know?’

‘He didn’t say so, but I think perhaps another man, a contemporary, might be useful to him.’

The major blew out his moustache.

‘How do you mean—contemporary?’ he demanded belligerently. ‘I can give him twenty years!’

‘Fourteen, to be exact, dear,’ said Catherine Tamworth. ‘Have you told the others, Sally?’

‘About Angela? Well, Marjorie and Nigel know, so I suppose they’ll tell the other two.’

‘Jeremy’s a fool,’ said his father, with a sudden explosion of anger. ‘Begins these ridiculous affairs and doesn’t consider the consequences.’

‘People never do,’ said Godiva. ‘That’s where freewill comes in. If we ever considered the consequences, we should never embark upon anything at all. Ah, me! It’s a very good thing that we can’t see into the future.’

‘What has freewill to do with that?’ demanded the major.

‘Oh, that we haven’t any, of course,’ said Winfrith. ‘I agree with Godiva. The future is settled for us before we actually come to it.’

‘What did you mean about Jeremy and his affairs?’ asked Godiva. The major cleared his throat protestingly.

‘Oh, nothing, nothing,’ he said. ‘I wasn’t really thinking about Jeremy at all. Well, if you’ll give me a lift in that contraption of yours,’ he added to Sally, ‘I’ll get along to Calshott and find out what he intends to do. Be a good idea to call this holiday off, I should think, but I’ll see what he has to say.’

Sally dropped the major at Sir Humphrey’s caravan and, she supposed, left

them in conclave. Lady Calshott came out to her van as she was about to drive off and said authoritatively, 'I suppose you won't go jaunting off by yourself again today, Sally?'

'I shall be in for lunch, if that is what you mean,' Sally replied. 'I want to write some letters.'

'About what has happened?'

'Well, I don't want to stay on here much longer, so I shall write to my grandmother to say I am on my way back.'

'The police may want to question you. I suppose you realise that?'

'Of course. With a father and a grandmother such as mine, I can hardly be ignorant of police procedure, Lady Calshott.'

'Oh, well, yes, I suppose that is true. Unfortunately it is all so different up here. One might as well be abroad and have done with it. Phyllis and I will not be going to the tent today. My husband will not expect it, nor would it be desirable in case the police should wish to question us. You won't go far away, will you?'

'Only to the usual spot where I park for the night.'

'Very well, so long as we know where to find you.'

Sally drove towards the head of the loch, stopped her van and, fishing out a deck-chair, sat in the open air with her writing-pad on her knee and composed a letter to her grandmother.

## (2)

'Two letters, written envelopes, not typed,' said Laura, indicating the missives she had placed beside her employer's plate, 'and both, if my eyes can be trusted, postmarked from north of the Border.'

'One from Sally,' said Dame Beatrice, picking up a paper-knife. 'I recognise her deplorable handwriting.'

'Hark who's talking!' said Laura, *sotto voce*. Dame Beatrice, whose hearing had not deteriorated with her years, caught the muttered comment and cackled harshly.

'My handwriting is indecipherable, not deplorable,' she observed.

'I used to find it indecipherable,' admitted Laura, 'but one can interpret anything, given time and the necessary amount of practice;'

'Granted. Well, this seems to be a very long epistle. I will put off reading it until after breakfast. The other is very much slimmer.' She slit it open and glanced at the signature. 'Sir Humphrey Calshott,' she said. 'Lady Calshott's

hand I would have recognised from a previous short correspondence.' She read the letter and passed it over to Laura.

'Golly!' said the secretary. 'Suicide, no less! Well, well! I take it that Sally's letter contains details. So Sir H. is calling off the expedition as soon as the police have finished making their enquiries. I suppose he could do nothing else, as the woman was some sort of relative.'

'She was Lady Calshott's cousin,' said Dame Beatrice. 'Eat your breakfast and then we will see what Sally has to say.'

What Sally had to say was, as Laura put it when she and Dame Beatrice had read the letter, plenty. She began by emphasising Sir Humphrey's statement that the Loch na Tannasg expedition was to be called off and asked to be allowed to return to the Stone House from which she would get in touch with her friends in the hope that there was some prospect of their having found a flat.

'I shall be thankful to get away from this neighbourhood, anyway,' Sally had written. 'Apart from the death itself, which has been a shock to all of us, I was the unlucky person who found the body.'

'I had been given a day off and I went for a drive. As a matter of fact, I had been wondering, ever since I first came here, whether there was any access to an empty house and a crofter's cottage other than by crossing the loch. It seemed to me that there must be a road leading round to both, and I set out to find it.'

'Both buildings had been deserted for a long time, so the road I found was overgrown and too narrow, anyway, for my van, so I did the last bit on foot. It began to rain, so I raced for the cottage, which was much nearer than the house, and there was Angela's body.'

Laura looked up at this point in her reading.

'Rotten luck that Sally had to be the one to find the body. Tell you what strikes me, though. Seems an odd sort of spot for a suicide to choose. You'd almost think she didn't want her body to be found.'

'Read on,' said Dame Beatrice.

'Oh? The plot thickens, does it?' Laura returned her attention to the letter and did as her employer had advised.

'Sir Humphrey,' the script went on, 'says he has no doubt what the police report will be, but, of course, we all expect to be obliged to hang on for a bit, as nobody has any idea how long these sort of enquiries take. But I'm in an awful spot, Grandmamma darling, because I can't believe in the suicide theory. *I think the poor woman was murdered.*'

'Murdered!' said Laura, looking up again.

‘What is more, Sally provides what you, no doubt, would call chapter and verse,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Does she, indeed?’

‘You see,’ the letter went on, ‘if I hadn’t, quite by chance, discovered the body, it could have lain where it was for years. That doesn’t much seem to indicate suicide. They always leave a note, I thought, saying why they did it, partly—well, mostly, I suppose—to justify themselves and, if they’ve any decent feelings, to make sure that nobody else is blamed for their death. I found no note, and am sure none was left in the caravan for the Calshotts to find. That’s the first thing. Secondly, there’s the business of the thermos flask.’

‘Oho!’ said Laura. ‘I suppose the thermos flask contained the evidence.’

‘The *faked* evidence, if Sally is right,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Good Lord! The plot does thicken, and with a vengeance!’

‘You see,’ Sally had written, ‘I happen to know that Angela never lumbered herself with sandwiches and a thermos flask when she went on these jaunts. Right from the beginning—no, not quite that, because Phyllis Calshott didn’t join us for the first two or three days and until she turned up Angela and I had the tent—anyway, as soon as Phyllis arrived, Angela packed up her share in the watching—watching for the monster to surface, you know—and said that, as she had only a fortnight to spend in Scotland, she was going to regard it as a holiday and use her time in seeing as much of the neighbourhood as she could.

‘We were quite used, then, to having her go out immediately after breakfast—never any question of her doing the washing-up, needless to say—but she always found somewhere or somebody to give her a cup of tea and a bit of lunch—bread and cheese, most likely—for, I must emphasise this, she *never* took food or drink with her. That means somebody else provided the thermos flask. Incidentally, there was no sign of any food, but that, perhaps, has no significance. I’m sure there will be traces of poison in the flask, but whether Angela drank any of the coffee, or whether she could have been poisoned elsewhere and the body, with the faked evidence, dumped in the ruined cottage, I don’t think it will be at all easy to find out, although I’m pretty sure that’s what happened.’

‘I can’t see that Sally is on very firm ground there,’ objected Laura.

‘I think she justifies herself, at any rate to her own satisfaction, if you read on,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘How far have you gone?’

‘To the bit where Sally thinks A.B. wasn’t poisoned at the cottage, but elsewhere.’

‘Ah, yes. Try the next paragraph.’

‘The thing is,’ Sally had written, ‘that, unless someone put her there, I can’t see what Angela was doing in the cottage at all. She was quite cold when I found her, so, as the rain had only just come on, she wouldn’t have been taking shelter from the storm. That was *my* reason for entering the cottage, worse luck!—but it couldn’t have been hers. Anyway, it was the last place where you’d choose to have lunch. It was not only almost in ruins, but there were cobwebs, bird-lime, rabbit and fox droppings and everything like that to put you off unless you really needed a bit of roof over your head, as I did. Moreover, her clothes were saturated, yet she couldn’t have been caught in the storm because it had only just come on when I raced to the cottage. She also had a throat wound which is thought to have been an unsuccessful attempt at suicide before she took the poison, but I think it happened after her death, because I don’t think it had bled.

‘Anyway, Grandmamma, I can’t make up my mind whether or not to mention these suspicions of mine to the police. If we were in England I suppose I’d feel bound to, but up here, where I don’t really understand the procedure or how long the enquiry, if I do start a hare, is likely to take, I feel much more doubtful. It’s not as though I’ve got any real proof and—the thing which appears to support the suicide theory—Angela had a letter that morning from her vicar to say he wouldn’t require her to keep house for him any longer, as he was making other arrangements. I’m told she was hoping to step from being his housekeeper into marriage with him and if that hope was destroyed I suppose it *might* have driven her over the edge. I just don’t know. But I *would* like your advice. Could you write straightaway? We’re sure to be here for another few days. Apart from the police, Sir Humphrey has to make arrangements for the removal and return to the hirers of the caravans and tents, which means a journey to Glasgow and perhaps a bit of a hold-up over the terms of hiring, as, of course, he expected to rent some of the gear—his own caravan and tent, if nothing more—for a couple of months instead of the rather short time we’ve been up here.’

‘So what do we do?’ asked Laura. ‘Sally’s a level-headed, unflappable sort of modern young woman, but this letter strikes me as a cry from the heart and an SOS of some magnitude.’

‘A telegram, suitably worded, is the immediate answer. After that, you had better arrange to have my car put on the train for Glasgow, and for ourselves to accompany it.’

‘Suppose I telegraphed: *Hold everything. We’re coming.* Would that fit the occasion?’

‘Admirably. George can take it to the village post-office and you can tell him to get the car ready for a journey to London.’

‘You won’t need him to drive?’

‘Not if you are willing to take the wheel.’

‘Right. I’ll book a London hotel for the night, then, and tomorrow we can entrain. What a good thing you *didn’t* fix up those visits to your relatives!’

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## CHAPTER 12

### The Vicar Denies Liability

‘... the fact that the document must have been *at hand*, if he intended to use it to good purpose.’

*Edgar Allan Poe.*



**F**ortunately,’ said Dame Beatrice, when an early lunch was over and they were ready to set out for London, ‘the vicarage is on our way.’

‘Miss Barton’s vicarage?’

‘Yes. Before we go to Tannasgan there is one fact which needs to be established.’

‘Whether the vicar really did write that letter, I suppose.’

‘If I did not love and respect you for any other reason, dear child, I would do so for your intelligence.’

‘Many thanks for unsolicited although ironic testimonial. I know the inference that he did not write such a letter was fairly obvious.’

‘Do you think so? There are unkind, thoughtless, fainthearted men among the clergy just as among men in any other calling, I assume.’

‘One doesn’t tend to think so, though.’

‘Possibly not, although they sometimes appear in fiction, and even the wildest fiction must, to some extent, be based on fact.’

‘You’re thinking of the Reverend Mr Brocklehurst, I suppose.’

‘There is also the ridiculous and sycophantic Mr Collins, not to mention Canon Chasuble and the Reverend Slowley Slowley Jones of happy Aldwych memory.’

‘Still, I think it’s a case of exceptions proving the rule. Incidentally, you realise that we don’t even know this particular cleric’s name?’

‘It will not elude us for long, although I wish Sally had thought to mention it in her letter.’

Forty miles along the road to London, Laura, under Dame Beatrice’s directions, turned off to the village which they sought. A halt at the church

produced the vicar's name from a gold-lettered notice board and the vicarage was close at hand. Laura remained in the car while Dame Beatrice walked up a narrow path to the front door. Here she produced a visiting-card which she handed to the maid, was invited in and found herself parked in a pleasant room which overlooked the garden.

She was not kept waiting. A thin, tall, athletic-looking man of between thirty-five and forty, wearing a suit in clerical grey of summer weight, came in, closed the door behind him and stretched out a short-fingered, muscular hand.

'Dame Beatrice? This is indeed a pleasure. I know your work, of course. I took an extra-mural course in applied psychology before I was ordained, and found your books most helpful and wonderfully free of the jargon one so often associates with such works.'

'Very kind indeed of you to say so.' Dame Beatrice briskly acknowledged the compliment and then went on without a pause: 'However, it was another aspect of my work which caused me to come and see you. I trust I have not chosen an inconvenient time?'

'Not at all. Oh, by no means. I have lunched and I do not need to begin my round of visits—the sick, you know, and people who have other problems—for at least another hour. Have you had lunch, by the way?'

'Oh, yes, indeed, thank you. Well, I hardly think my visit will need to last an hour, but, all the same, not to waste your time, I will come to the point at once.'

'Please, do sit down.'

Dame Beatrice took the armchair which he indicated and he seated himself on the settee opposite her.

'I will begin with an abrupt question which, I trust, will not offend you. Have you written to a Miss Angela Barton recently?' she asked.

'My housekeeper? I'm afraid I have been rather remiss. I really meant to send her a picture postcard while I was on holiday, but I mislaid her Scottish address and no amount of mental energy served to call it to mind. She went up to Scotland with her relatives, Sir Humphrey and Lady Calshott and their daughter, and although she sent me a picture postcard almost as soon as she got to Glasgow, she did not put her holiday address on it, and that was the last I heard. I assume that she was waiting to hear from me before she wrote again.'

'I am afraid you will never hear from her now.'

'You don't mean...'

'I should have broken it to you more gently, had there been time, but I am on my way to London, there to spend the night before I travel north to look into



things. No doubt you will be hearing from Sir Humphrey before long, but in the meantime he is heavily involved with the Scottish authorities. You see, the theory at present is that Miss Barton took her own life.'

'*Never!* I cannot believe that! Where is the evidence for it?'

'Well, the one thing which seems certain is that she took poison and died of the effects.'

'Dame Beatrice! That cannot be true! Poor, poor Miss Barton! It must have been an oversight, an accident! She never would have done such a thing deliberately. She was an upright woman, a churchwoman, a consistent and most valuable worker in the parish. I cannot believe that she would compass her own death, whatever the reason!'

'You are not entirely alone in your opinion.'

'Dame Beatrice, you may not know this, but, in time, my intention is to marry.'

'Possibly to marry Angela Barton?'

'To marry Angela Barton? Good gracious, no! She had become my housekeeper, but that was only a temporary arrangement, as, surely, she was fully aware.'

'Are you sure you did not write to her to emphasise this?'

'Perfectly certain. You are about to make something plain to me, but what it is I have not the remotest idea.'

'A letter was found beside the body purporting to come from you.'

'I wrote her no letter,' said the vicar emphatically.

'It appears that you told her you had no further use for her services.'

'Nonsense! Utter, wicked nonsense! I should never have dismissed her in such a callous way. Really, Dame Beatrice, I cannot understand your believing anything so monstrous!'

'I did not say I believed it. In fact, I do not. My object in travelling north is to establish the truth, if I can.'

'Is there anything more you can tell me?'

'There are gaps in my information, but I will tell you all I know. Miss Barton was found dead in a ruined cottage above Loch na Tannasg. The letter to which I referred, and which bears your name at the end, was lying on the floor beside the body; so was an overturned thermos flask, the vehicle in which, it is assumed, the poison was conveyed to the deceased.'

'A thermos flask? But Miss Barton never burdened herself with such a thing. She organised several church outings for the older parishioners and for the

Sunday School children, but was always adamant that she carried no sandwiches or flask of any kind with her. "I'll find something somewhere, or go without," she would say. "I loathe picnic meals. If I cannot find somewhere to get a cup of tea and a bit of bread and cheese, I will go hungry." I used to try to persuade her to share my own small snack, but she never would.'

'I wonder whether I might trouble you for a sheet of your notepaper for purposes of comparison with the letter which, I assume, is now in the hands of the Scottish authorities?'

'Certainly, and I must emphasise that I wrote no letter.'

'And you believe him?' asked Laura, when Dame Beatrice was again in the car and they were headed for Basingstoke.

'Implicitly,' Dame Beatrice replied. 'He did not write that letter. It remains for us to find out who did, for whoever wrote it is a murderer.'

'And that holds good, even if Angela Barton did poison herself,' said Laura.

'I doubt whether Angela Barton ever read that letter,' said Dame Beatrice. 'Even if she had, the impression I formed of her character (on, admittedly, a very cursory acquaintance) inclines me to think that, on receipt of such a document, she would have sped back to the vicarage...'

'What-the-helling at the top of her voice, you mean?'

'Your idiom is picturesque and describes the impression which, in less well-chosen words, I was attempting to convey. I believe the letter was left by the murderer to indicate that death was due to suicide.'

'What makes you so sure the vicar was telling the truth about that letter?' asked Laura when, after dinner that evening, they were seated in Dame Beatrice's room in a London hotel. 'I mean, if he denies sending it, the person who *did* write it is in a bit of a mess, isn't he?'

'Or she, of course. If Angela Barton made enemies, I feel that they would be women rather than men.'

'That could bring those sisters into it. You told me about them after you and Sally had been to Phyllis Calshott's birthday party. I suppose, when you come to think of it, Phyllis herself could be involved. She isn't all that young. Didn't Sally mention to us once that Phyllis is twenty-six? If that is so, and she is still "spinster of this parish", she might be getting desperate at seeing herself on the shelf, especially in these days when girls seem to marry at sixteen and have the first baby—if they decide to have babies at all—before they are out of their teens.'

'She went riding with Jeremy Tamworth while Sally and I were there.'

‘That may not have been *his* fault,’ said Laura. ‘Anyway, we accept the vicar’s denials as the truth, do we, and proceed from there?’

‘It makes a starting-point, as you observe. But now I think you should retire to bed. We have a long journey before us tomorrow and Glasgow is not the end of it.’

‘I wonder whether Sally herself has any suspicions? If she thinks it was murder, she must have something to go on.’

‘Well, like the vicar, she has voiced doubts about the thermos flask. That, and the most unlikely place where the body was found, must form a large part of Sally’s suspicions.’

‘What advice will you give her about voicing her suspicions to the police?’

‘I shall advise her to say nothing. It can do no good at this stage, and I think she would be unwise to involve herself unnecessarily. So long as she answers any questions truthfully, there is nothing more, at present, which she can usefully do.’

‘Just in case the vicar thinks up something helpful, how will he get in touch with us?’

‘His telephone number is on the sheet of paper I borrowed from him, so I rang him up just before dinner, have given him the name and telephone number of this hotel and have mentioned that the village whose name he either had forgotten or did not know is called Tannasgan. What makes you think he may have something helpful to tell us?’

‘It was only a passing thought. You know how it is, though. Somebody starts talking about something and you think, well, that’s that, when suddenly something else strikes you, and you wonder why on earth you didn’t think of it at the time.’

Dame Beatrice had often wondered whether her secretary, who had Highland ancestors on both sides of the family, possessed something very near to second sight. On this occasion her secretary’s passing thought turned to reality just as Dame Beatrice, having sent Laura to bed, had taken out a volume of poetry and was settling down to her habitual bedtime reading. The telephone rang in her room and the voice of the receptionist said, ‘Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley? Are you prepared to have the charges reversed on a call from Hampshire?’

‘Certainly,’ Dame Beatrice replied. ‘Put the caller through at once, please.’

She recognised, as she had been certain she would, the scholarly Oxford voice.

‘Oh, Dame Beatrice! So good of you. I hope I did not get you out of bed?’

‘No, no, vicar. Please go on. This is an excellent line.’

‘Well, I have suddenly thought of something. That letter you mentioned which purported to come from me.’

‘Yes? The letter which was found beside the body?’

‘That’s it. Well, all my notepaper is stamped with my name and address.’

‘Every sheet is stamped with your name and address, yes, I see. I noticed that your telephone number was also on the sheet you gave me.’

‘Yes, well, that is just the point. The telephone number is a recent addition. If the letter I am supposed to have written does not carry this information, I certainly did not send it within the time Miss Barton has been at Tannasgan. I hope this will clear away any doubts which may have been in your mind.’

‘Your own statement did that, so far as I am concerned. Thank you so much for ringing.’

‘And you, for agreeing to reverse the charges.’

Dame Beatrice replaced the receiver and rehearsed to herself what the vicar had just told her. Granted that he had not written the letter—and she was more than prepared to believe that he had known nothing of it at all prior to her visit—there were two points to consider.

One was that if his personal headed notepaper, with his printed telephone number as well as his address, had not been used, the letter was undoubtedly a forgery. The other was that (still taking it for granted that the vicar was not the writer) if the forger *had* used a sheet of the vicar’s notepaper, then he or she could be somebody who, at some time or other, had had access to the vicarage and an opportunity to purloin a sheet of the headed stationery, with or without the telephone number printed on it.

‘And that,’ said Dame Beatrice to Laura, as they established themselves in the train after an early breakfast on the following morning, ‘opens up an avenue leading to many interesting byways, don’t you think?’

‘Could be any one of the parties who went to Tannasgan, you mean? They all live in the vicar’s parish except Sally.’

‘And possibly Mr Pring, who was visiting the Parrises. However, whoever it was went prepared with documentary evidence of Miss Barton’s suicide, I think.’

‘Here be villains,’ said Laura soberly.

‘Yes, indeed. I wonder whether the police have kept the letter? Not that it matters, because Sally is an observant person with a good memory, and she will tell us whether it was written on headed notepaper. There is something else I

must ask her, although the answer is obvious, I feel.'

'Whether the letter as well as the body was sodden, I suppose.'

'You read my thoughts, as you so often do.'

'It takes some doing to forge a whole letter, doesn't it?'

'It depends upon whether the reader of the letter is familiar with the handwriting of the person the letter purports to come from.'

'And, so far as we know, the only people who have seen the letter, apart from the forger himself or herself, are Sally and the police, I suppose, and neither of them would recognise the vicar's handwriting. But the forger couldn't be sure about that. I mean, it need not have been Sally who found the letter in the first place.'

'I am inclined to think that the letter was an over-elaboration, in any case, and over-elaboration has sometimes proved to be a murderer's worst enemy.'

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## CHAPTER 13

### Dame Beatrice Goes North

‘... and I did not want any token of regard, being conducted where there was any thing which I desired to see, and entertained at once with the novelty of the place, and the kindness of communication.’

*Doctor Samuel Johnson.*



(1)

**I**t was pouring with rain when the train pulled in at Glasgow. Laura drove to the vast Central Hotel and secured two rooms for the night, and she and her employer decided upon an early start for Tannasgan on the morrow.

‘I don’t see that we could have done much today, anyway, by the time we should have got there,’ said Laura, ‘and it wouldn’t have been any fun driving in this weather.’

‘I trust your judgment,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘particularly as you are at the wheel. I think, too, that the amenities offered by this hotel are likely to be much preferred to any which we shall find at the village inn.’

However, at midday on the following day they found a welcoming hostess in the person of Mrs McLaughlin and also an enthusiastic Sally who had been at the inn since eleven.

‘I guessed you’d stay for the night in Glasgow,’ she said, ‘but I showed up here last night just in case you should have decided to chance the weather. What do you want to do first?’

‘Have lunch,’ said Laura. ‘I’m starving.’

‘I hope you will join us, Sally,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘So do I,’ said Sally. ‘I shall enjoy food cooked by Mrs McLaughlin after Lady Calshott’s efforts. No shop, I take it, until we’ve eaten?’

The ‘shop’ consisted of questions and answers and took place in Sally’s van

after lunch. By the time the conversation was ended, Dame Beatrice agreed that there was sufficient substance in Sally's contention that Angela's death was a case of murder to warrant, at any rate, a discreet form of enquiry.

'Mind you,' said Sally, 'I'm not asking you to stick your neck out, Grandmamma. If the Fiscal, or whoever it is, says suicide, I think we must leave it at that. I'd just like to *know*, that's all.'

'Now that I have spoken with the vicar, I share your desire to have the cards on the table,' said Dame Beatrice. 'The letter seems to have been the only motive for suicide, and I am convinced that he did not write the letter. The question which remains is, who did, and for what reason? Even if the poor woman did take her own life as a result of reading such a letter, the person who wrote it and forged the vicar's signature is morally responsible for her death. That is, provided that she had read the letter, a matter which may be difficult to prove.'

'So what's our first move?'

'A series of conversations with the members of your party, beginning with Sir Humphrey and Lady Calshott. It is no more than civil, in any case, on my part, to meet and have a chat with them.'

By previous arrangement with her employer, Laura, having been introduced in the afternoon to the Calshotts, suggested that she would like to see more of the loch.

'We could walk as far as the tent,' said Phyllis Calshott at once. 'You'll come, too, Sally, won't you?'

'I'm afraid dear Sally has had rather a shock,' said Lady Calshott, when the three younger people had left the caravan. 'It was she, you know, who found poor Angela.'

'Yes, she sent for me,' said Dame Beatrice. 'The news must have come as a great shock to you, too.'

'I can't understand it,' said Sir Humphrey. 'I would have thought that Angela was the very last person to take her own life, no matter what distress of mind she was in.'

'Oh, she was always very tense and embittered underneath, you know,' said his wife. 'The thing which surprises *me* is that the vicar should have written such a cruel, heartless letter. I suppose he could not find the courage to tell Angela face to face that she was redundant.'

'Well, my dear, she did set her cap at him in the most uncompromising fashion, if you remember.'

'I think, before we go any farther, there is something you ought to know,'

said Dame Beatrice. ‘Sally told me about the letter and I took it upon myself to go and see the vicar. He has no knowledge of such a letter and most definitely denies having written it.’

Sir Humphrey looked astounded. Lady Calshott said, ‘Then there was no need for Angela... But who would have thought of playing such a cruel trick? I think, Humphrey, that you had better have a word with Jeremy Tamworth.’

‘Jeremy Tamworth? Oh, now, really, my dear! I shall institute enquiries, of course, but they must be made discreetly. I can’t go about handing out accusations against particular people at this stage. We do not even know that it was the letter which actuated poor Angela. Besides, we must wait to hear what the police and the Procurator-Fiscal have to say.’

‘I thought the interview you had yesterday with the inspector indicated clearly what they will have to say.’

‘Oh, did you speak to the inspector of police yesterday?’ asked Dame Beatrice.

‘For the second time,’ replied Sir Humphrey, ‘and the police surgeon was also good enough to have a talk with me. My wife is quite right. There is no doubt about a verdict of suicide. Angela’s age, you know, was against her from the point of view of the police surgeon—women between the ages of forty and fifty, you understand—and I had to confess that she was always a strung-up, bitter kind of creature, although I did tell him that I had never thought of possible suicide. Anyway, I am glad, for Sally’s sake, that you have come to take her home, Dame Beatrice. I’m sure she will be relieved to get away from here.’

‘So shall we all,’ said Lady Calshott. ‘I am only very sorry that we ever came. All that trouble and expense, and now this to happen, and nothing to show for it, either.’

‘Have the police decided by what means the death was effected?’ asked Dame Beatrice.

‘Oh, yes, and we have permission to bury the body. Angela died from strychnine poisoning. The remains of the coffee still contained enough of the drug to poison a dozen people, I am told.’

‘And the metal cup which would have formed the top of the flask? Sally told me that it was lying near the body.’

‘The police assume that poor Angela drank directly from the flask itself. The cup had not been used. That does not sound like Angela, but the experts would not have been wrong.’

‘Fingerprints?’



‘On the flask, the inspector told me, but not on the cup.’

‘That seems very strange. She would have had to unscrew the cap which forms the cup on a thermos flask, even if she did not drink from it, would she not?’

‘To bear out the theory of suicide, she had wounded herself in the throat and had also attempted drowning.’

‘Is Miss Barton to be buried up here?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Lady Calshott, before her husband could answer. ‘Mrs McLauchlin, at the hotel, is helping me over the arrangements. There is no point in transporting the body all the way down to Hampshire. After all, if people are foolish and wicked enough to put an end to their own lives, they cannot expect amenities.’

‘So this is where you saw the monster,’ said Laura.

‘Just about here,’ said Sally. ‘I wasn’t going to tell anyone, but Angela’s death seems to have made a difference. I mean, Sir Humphrey mustn’t go off without a clue.’

‘You mustn’t say anything to Daddy,’ said Phyllis. ‘You see, Sally darling, you’ve had an awful shock, finding Angela like that, and...’

‘You think I’m only imagining I saw something in the loch? —that I’m making this up?’ said Sally, amused. ‘I assure you—that there *is* something and that I *did* see it. The only reason I haven’t mentioned it before seems to have been a very good reason, doesn’t it?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘I felt I wouldn’t be believed, and now I see how right I was.’

‘I believe you,’ said Laura. ‘You say it winked at you. You wouldn’t have made *that* up. You wouldn’t have thought of it.’

Sally laughed.

‘What an odd way of convincing yourself,’ she said, ‘but it certainly did seem to wink at me. It was as though we shared some huge, secret joke.’

‘The joke was that it showed itself to you, but not to any of the rest of us, I suppose,’ said Phyllis. ‘Look, Sally, if you tell Daddy, he’ll want to stay up here and go on watching. Mummy and I are longing to get home. Apart from all this dreadful business of Angela, it’s becoming most terribly boring, all these wretched meals and having to go to bed at ten and get up at dawn and man the beastly tent with nothing to see but hills and mountains and a lot of peat-stained water.’

‘But doesn’t the fact that Sally has seen the monster make any difference?’

asked Laura.

‘No, because, well, actually, I don’t believe it. Sally has lots of imagination. She must have, or she couldn’t write books.’

‘Oh, yes, my novel,’ said Sally. ‘Sir Humphrey says he’s going to publish it, Laura. I must remember to tell Grandmamma. With all this other business I’d forgotten all about my book.’

‘Tell us the plot,’ said Phyllis.

‘I don’t suppose it has one,’ said Laura. ‘Modern novels don’t, on the whole. That’s why I like detective stories, old-fashioned although people think them nowadays. At least they have a beginning, a middle and an end. Has your novel those items, Sally?’

‘When it comes out I’ll give you a copy and you can find out for yourself,’ said Sally. ‘How far do you want to walk?’

‘Oh, you turn back when you’ve had enough of it. I enjoy walking on my own. How about Miss Calshott?’

‘Oh, do, please, call me Phyllis. I’m beginning to think about tea. Are you beginning to think about tea, Sally?’

‘Not yet. Why don’t you go and help get it ready? Laura and I would still like to go as far as the tent before we turn back. I want to show her our camera with the telephoto lens.’

‘Don’t you really want your tea?’ asked Laura, when Phyllis had left them.

‘Not as much as I wanted to get shot of Phyllis for a bit. What do you make of the Calshotts, Laura, now that you’ve met them? Do you think they know Angela Barton didn’t poison herself?’

‘I wouldn’t care to venture an opinion. Personally, if I were in their shoes, I’d be glad to settle for a verdict of suicide and have done with it, I suppose.’

‘I don’t believe you would, Laura. All the same, I don’t think they were very fond of her, so they’re not likely to want revenge on the person who poisoned her in the way you’d want to avenge someone you dearly loved. I mean, had it been Phyllis, for example, they’d have moved heaven and earth to find out the truth, I suppose.’

‘Yes,’ said Laura. ‘The trouble is, you know, Sally, that you can’t trust a murderer not to do it again. That’s the reason why the truth ought to be known. Supposing that it *was* murder, who’s your pick for the killer?’

‘I couldn’t possibly answer that question, Laura. Nobody, I fancy, *liked* Angela, but there’s all the difference in the world between not liking a person and taking that person’s life away. Angela snooped and pried and said bitter,

unpleasant things about people, but none of it, surely, could have been motive enough for somebody to have murdered her.'

'We don't know that. If, in her snooping and prying, she had got hold of somebody's guilty secret, that could have been motive enough, don't you think?'

'Oh, but, Laura, our sort of people don't have guilty secrets.'

'Bless your innocent heart!' said Laura. 'Hullo, there's your tent. Where's this camera?'

'Up there on the bluff.'

They inspected the expensive private eye and then Laura asked, in a casual tone, 'How far from here is the cottage where you found her?'

'Hard to say. It's somewhere on the other side of the mountain. You can see it from the opposite side of the loch, but not from here.'

'You remember that letter you found? Was it wet or dry?'

'Perfectly dry. The ink hadn't run at all. To my mind, that's proof it was put there by the murderer, because Angela's clothes were soaking wet, as though she'd fallen into the loch.'

'It never hurts to have a re-run of the evidence. Had she been sick?'

'I never thought of that, or of the letter being dry, but, no, she hadn't been sick, not in the cottage, anyway.'

'Perhaps not all poisons make you sick. I wonder where she was actually given the stuff, and how long it takes to act?'

'I've thought all along, Laura, that the body was dumped in the cottage. I've never thought Angela died there.'

'Big, heavy woman?'

'Oh, no, hungry-looking and thin and about five-three tall, that's all. Anybody could have carried her.'

'Either sex?'

Sally stared at her.

'Either sex?' she repeated. 'Well, yes, I suppose so. One reasonably strong or determined woman could have managed it, I should think, at any rate for a short distance.'

'And two could have managed it easily?'

'Oh, well, yes. But what two? You're not thinking of Lady Calshott and Phyllis, I hope?'

Laura wagged her head solemnly.

'The prime suspects are always the nearest and dearest relatives,' she replied. 'Did Cousin Angela have anything much to leave?'

‘Oh, Laura, what a beastly idea!’

‘Beastly it may be, but it’s money that’s at the bottom of most murders. It has sex, revenge and ritual killing beaten all ends up. Show me who gains and I’ll tell you who done it. That’s the slogan the police go by, anyway.’

‘Well, I don’t know who would gain by Angela’s death, or how much she had to leave. The fact that she took service with the vicar doesn’t mean very much, because the general idea is that she did so only to get a foot in at the vicarage with a view to subsequent matrimony. The rumours are that she was pretty comfortably off. It was marriage she wanted.’

‘Then whoever forged that letter must have known about that. Did Dame B. ask you whether it was written on the vicar’s headed notepaper?’

‘Yes, it was, so that points to one of our own party, doesn’t it? But I don’t remember a telephone number, though.’

‘Well, who could it be? It must be one of your party. A tramp wouldn’t have poisoned her. He’d have strangled her or knocked her on the head. We mentioned Lady Calshott and Phyllis a moment ago, but I don’t think we were at all serious.’

‘I wouldn’t put much past Lady Calshott,’ said Sally thoughtfully, ‘but I think we must wash out Phyllis.’

‘Sir Humphrey, then?’

‘Oh, no, not Sir Humphrey!’

‘Because he’s going to publish your book? Oh, no, sorry! That’s a dirty crack. Why not Sir Humphrey?’

‘I can’t tell you. It’s just a feeling I have that, whatever the temptation, Sir Humphrey would stop short of murder.’

‘Oh, well, if them’s your sentiments I must respect them. But, apart from the Calshotts, who else could possibly gain from Miss Barton’s death?’

‘According to Phyllis, it could be the Benson sisters, Godiva and Winfrith. They, too, had designs on the vicarage as a desirable residence until Angela appeared on the scene.’

‘Hm! Strike you as murderous types?’

‘That’s the trouble,’ said Sally, as they turned to walk back to the caravan, ‘nobody in our outfit strikes me as a murderous type with the possible exception of the major. But with him, you see, there doesn’t seem the faintest suggestion of a motive. I’ll tell you one thing, though. It can’t possibly have anything to do with the murder, but you know I landed up here at Tannasgan a day or two before the others? Well, as a matter of fact, one of the others beat me to it.

Jeremy Tamworth was in the village for a week before Sir Humphrey and the rest of the party arrived, and Angela more than hinted that Marjorie Parris was with him nearly all the time, while her husband was at a vet's conference.'

(2)

'So that's how it stands, according to Sally,' said Laura, when she and Dame Beatrice were back at the inn. 'Lady Calshott, possibly, if there was anything to gain, but definitely neither Phyllis nor Sir Humphrey.'

'There was quite a reasonable amount to be gained by Lady Calshott. She was frank with me. It seems that Miss Barton was far from being short of money, and that, as the only child of the chief surviving relative, Lady Calshott's daughter Phyllis is the principal beneficiary under the will, unless that will has been altered recently. Miss Barton herself told Lady Calshott as much.'

'It may well have been altered, though,' said Laura, 'if Angela intended to marry the vicar.'

'On the other hand, a bold and greedy person might have decided that Angela must die before that could be done. Not everybody, perhaps, is aware that marriage automatically invalidates a will made previously.'

'You're thinking of the unworldly twin sisters, I suppose. By the way, just in case this does turn out to be murder—and we're pretty sure it will—how does Sally stand? I mean, she did find the body and all that. I wonder whether—supposing the police accept that Miss Barton committed suicide—I mean, mightn't it be better if we left it at that, and didn't begin interfering?'

'I'm ashamed of you,' said Dame Beatrice, favouring her secretary with a ferocious leer. 'You know as well as I do why we must find out the truth.'

'Yes, of course. That's what I told Sally. You can't be sure somebody won't do it again.'

'Exactly. What impression did Sally give you of the two Miss Bensons?'

'Just of two people who had designs on the vicarage, as did Angela Barton. I'd rather like to meet them, but tomorrow I have other fish to fry.'

'If you mean that you intend to visit that cottage, I think you would be wasting your time. There can be nothing to be learned there now.'

'I'm not so sure. I wouldn't mind taking a look round up there, anyway. Call it morbid curiosity, if you like.'

'I will not call it that. I perceive that you have an idea which may lead to a plan of action.'

'You read me like a book,' said Laura.

‘I always did,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Yours is a frank and open nature; your personality is well-balanced and attractive; you have no apparent vices and your temperament is cheerful, agreeable and without complications or foibles.’

‘You make me sound like a well-trained retriever,’ said Laura, ‘or a nice, useful show-jumper.’

‘A thoroughbred, anyway,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘whatever the genus.’

‘I am a direct descendant of Sir Robert de Mengues whose lands became a barony in 1487. Since then the clan name has been spelt Menzies, the g in Sir Robert’s surname being changed, for some reason, into a z, and the clan called Mingies.’

‘Except, I believe, in Australia,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Same reason, as P. G. Wodehouse points out, as that you can’t call yourself Augustus Mannering-Phipps in New York,’ said Laura. ‘The Aussies are a crude lot, on the whole, and won’t stand for anyone putting on dog. To call yourself *Mingies* when spelling it *Menzies* would be asking for trouble out there. They’re ignorant and intolerant, I suppose.’

‘And yet many of the people who have mapped Australia by exploration and daring—Mitchell, MacKay, MacPherson, Forbes, Murray, Eyre, Young, Gairdner, MacDonald, MacDonnell, Simpson, Gibb, Bruce, to name but a few—must all have been of Scottish extraction,’ Dame Beatrice pointed out.

‘There’s even a town called Laura,’ said her secretary modestly, refusing to be ruffled by the gibe.

On the following morning Sally took Dame Beatrice in the motorised caravan to visit the parties on the south shore of the loch while Laura, having learned the route from Sally, took Dame Beatrice’s car along the hill roads to the cottage.

She did not go inside. She tramped through the bracken which was growing almost up to the open doorway, pushed her way past the crumbling walls and the lopsided, fallen-away thatch and then stumbled upon what Sally had told her she would find. This was the semblance of a path, overgrown, it was true, but there was no doubt either of its existence or of the fact that it had recently been in use.

As Laura ploughed her way downwards, the path described a couple of hairpin bends and at the second of these the hunting-lodge came in sight. The bracken gave way to heather, the slope became more gradual, and below Laura lay Loch na Tannasg glittering in the sun and seemingly flat and calm.

Laura approached the hunting-lodge and banged on the door. There was no answer. She attempted to open it, but found that it was locked, so she toured

around the house, stopping to peer in at the ground-floor windows. At the back of the house she had better luck. The kitchen door was latched but not locked. Laura, like the heroine of a ballad or a fairytale, lifted the latch and walked in.

(3)

Dame Beatrice, meanwhile, was meeting the other members of the expedition. She was kindly, even enthusiastically, received by all, including the usually curmudgeonly major, for Sally had elected to take her grandmother first to the farthest point. They found the major, his wife and the two Benson sisters still at breakfast, although at the later stages of the meal.

‘Glad to see you again, Dame Beatrice,’ said the major. ‘Had your breakfast at the pub, I suppose, eh? You early birds put the rest of us to shame, what? Come to take young Sally home, I suppose. No point in staying up here any longer, I take it. Eh, Sally? Bad luck, this funny business of that Barton woman. Odd sort of type. Never thought she’d do for herself, though. Selfish as the devil, these middle-aged spinsters. No possible thought for others. Might have known it would put paid to poor old Calshott’s plans (dotty though everybody knows they are), and to the rest of our holiday, too.’

‘You are still doubtful about the existence of the monster, then?’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I remember that you expressed yourself freely on the subject when we were fellow-guests in Hampshire. You have not seen fit to alter your opinion?’

‘God bless my soul, no! A lot of poppycock!’

‘I wonder you consented to take part in the expedition, feeling as you do.’

‘Took the chance of a cheap holiday, that’s all,’ said the major, with engaging frankness. ‘Nothing to pay for except our flight. Even a car laid on from Glasgow. Food, drink and shelter all provided free, and nothing to do all day but eat and sleep and keep an occasional eye on the water as a token payment, don’t you know. Getting browned off with it now, though. Shan’t be sorry to get home. Uncomfortable sort of atmosphere up here now. Police and all that.’

‘Oh, you’ve had a visit from the police, have you?’

‘Just a routine check, they said. Couldn’t help them, of course. Hardly knew the damn’—the poor woman. No clue to her private life at all, except the rumour that she was setting her cap at the vicar. Still, they only bothered us once. Anxious to know how she could have got hold of the poison. As though we should have any clue to a thing like that! Asked them what poison it was, but they weren’t letting on, although I suppose they know.’

‘Well, she could not have got it here,’ said Catherine Tamworth, ‘unless she

bought it in Glasgow on the way up.'

'Don't talk rubbish, my dear,' said the major. 'She would have been with Humphrey and Mildred all the time. What chance would she have had to go careering off to buy poison?'

'Then she must have brought it with her,' said Winfrith Benson.

'Don't the shepherds put poison in sheep-dip?' asked Godiva. 'She might have got hold of some on one of her walks.'

'She might, at that, by Jove!' said the major. 'First sensible suggestion I've heard. You ought to have mentioned that to the police, Miss Godiva. Maybe it hasn't occurred to them. Remember the case of a chap who died dipping sheep? Had a cut on his arm and the stuff got into his bloodstream and did for him. His wife was nearly topped for murder, I believe, until somebody had second thoughts. Must have had a damn' clever lawyer, that woman.'

Sally had been tempted to make an observation before the major had concluded this speech, but met the hypnotic eye of her grandmother and kept back the words. Godiva said, 'The idea had only just occurred to me. Oh, well, Winfrith, if you've finished breakfast, I suppose we had better man the boat and get over on to the other side.'

'Shouldn't think there's the slightest need,' said the major. 'I take it the expedition is all washed up and finished. I think, after lunch, we'd all better converge on Calshott and suggest we make for home. He'll be in touch with the police and will know whether it's all right for us to leave, but I should think, myself, that there'd be no point in keeping us here any longer.'

'We must ask about the funeral, dear, and see what arrangements can be made about flowers,' said his wife.

'Winfrith and I will not be sending flowers,' said Godiva. 'It is against our beliefs to take part in pagan customs. And now, major, we rely on your help in pushing the boat out.'

At this double-edged phrase the major first stared and then roared with laughter. He finished by saying decidedly, 'Not me, my dear girl. Not in either sense. Nobody will expect us to go on duty today. You begin packing up your things and later on I'll go over to young Parris and arrange for his estate car to take our gear over to Calshott's caravan ready for the long trek home.'

'I could take a message, if you like,' said Sally. 'It will be on our way, and will save you a walk in this heat, major.'

'Very civil of you, my dear. Catherine, you'd better begin packing up. The sooner we can all get away, the better.'



‘Come along, Winfrith,’ said Godiva. ‘If others shirk their duties and ignore their commitments, the Bensons do not. To the boat, and we will keep faith with Sir Humphrey.’

‘Before you go,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘I should tell you that this is more than a merely friendly visit, delighted though I am to see you all again. In short, I am here to pump you.’ She glanced with birdlike, cruel brightness from one apprehensive countenance to another. The only face which did not appear to have changed was that of Catherine Tamworth, who merely looked mildly interested.

‘Pump us, dear lady?’ said the major, looking aghast. ‘What the devil!’

‘I am sorry to have been so abrupt. As a psychiatrist, I am interested in the mentality of suicides. Why is it, I ask myself, that circumstances which lead A to trust to good fortune and hope that matters will right themselves, can lead B to take his own life?’

‘God-damn cowardice,’ said the major.

‘I don’t think it can be that, dear,’ said his wife. ‘It must take tremendous resolution.’

‘From what I am told,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘Miss Barton appears to have made three attempts, the third of which was successful. What state of mind was she in when you last saw her, which was, I believe, on the morning of her death?’

‘Just as usual,’ said the major. ‘Came here with Sally. Nothing wrong with her, so far as I could see. A bit surprised, I expect, to find I’d swapped caravans with young Parris and his lot, but so was Sally a bit surprised, come to that.’

‘I didn’t see Angela,’ said Catherine Tamworth, ‘but I heard her voice. She sounded quite normal, I thought, didn’t you, dear?’

‘Thought I’d said so,’ said the major.

‘We also heard her, but didn’t see her,’ said Godiva, ‘but perhaps she hadn’t read the letter then. I heard her ask the major to ferry her across the loch when he took us over to the watching-site below the hunting-lodge.’

‘Oh, yes, so Sally told me. And *did* you ferry her across, major?’

‘No, he did not. He went fishing,’ said Godiva.

‘Do you know where she went after she left you? *Somebody* seems to have taken her over the water.’

‘Oh, as to that,’ said Winfrith, ‘I think she walked to the head of the loch and then followed the river and waded across it where she could. You could reach the other side of the loch that way.’

‘What makes you think that that is what she did?’

‘She suggested it herself,’ said Godiva. ‘I heard her.’

‘And stalked off in that direction,’ said the major.

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## CHAPTER 14

### The Hunting-Lodge and the Island

‘The virtues were but seven, and three the  
greatest be;  
The Caesars they were twelve, and the fatal  
Sisters three;  
And three merry girls, and three merry girls are  
we.’

*Anonymous (17th Century).*



The hunting-lodge, Laura concluded, as she explored the ground floor rooms and then climbed the stairs, had died of neglect. It was impossible, merely by looking at it, to decide how long it had been uninhabited. Four of the windows overlooked the loch, but, of these, only from two, both of them upstairs, could a comprehensive view of even part of the loch be obtained. That this had been taken into consideration by Sir Humphrey’s watchers was shown by the presence of two folding chairs, canvas-backed and canvas-seated and in almost new condition, which were opposite the bedroom window which gave the widest view.

Laura took one of them, unslung the binoculars she was carrying and made a survey. Far to her left she could see the solitary island which commanded the head of the loch. She noticed the ruins which Sally, at first sight, had taken for those of a castle, and she saw that, to the right, the main part of the loch was cut off from her view by the mountain behind which she had driven to get to the cottage.

The water, to which she was now much nearer than when she had obtained her first sight of it from the road, did not appear as unruffled as she had thought. She swept its surface with the glasses and then picked out a boat which was being rowed across the loch in her direction.

‘Oh, Lord! Two of the watchers,’ thought Laura. ‘I don’t want company.’ She vacated her chair and descended the stairway. I’ll just take a last look round

before I go. This house isn't all that far from the cottage, and you never know your luck.' She had noticed a closed inner door in the kitchen and deduced that, since the house was built on rising ground, it must be the door to the cellar.

It appeared to be secured by a large, old-fashioned type of padlock, but Laura, who believed in testing apparent obstacles in order to find out how valid and insurmountable they were, pulled at the smooth, rounded arm at the top of the lock and discovered that it had been pushed into place but not fastened.

She pulled the door open, fished in a pocket of her anorak and produced matches. She struck one, perceived that the flight of steps in front of her was a short one, stamped on the match and cautiously felt her way down.

'Spiders,' she thought, 'but hardly rats, with nothing to eat in the place.'

At the bottom of the flight—she felt for firm ground with an exploring shoe—she struck another match. The cellar, at first sight, was disappointing. All that it contained was a number of empty casks. Laura blew out the match and rolled one of the casks to the foot of the cellar steps where there was an infiltration of light from the room above. As she did so, she was aware of something rolling and bouncing away inside the cask.

It proved to be an empty bottle and as she groped for it she thought there was a smell of spirits in the cellar.

'Surely the previous inhabitants didn't buy their whisky by the cask?' she said aloud. Having fished out the bottle, she rolled the cask away from the foot of the steps and bore her prize aloft. It proved to have contained (if its label was to be trusted) sparkling burgundy. Laura had been informed by Sally of Sir Humphrey's generosity in providing this elixir for his party. 'That's a bit odd,' she thought, 'to find it here. You'd think they'd drink it at lunch or dinner in the caravan, not bring it across the loch as a private tippie for two. Wonder which two it was?'

She closed the cellar door, went out by the back way, tossed the bottle into the bushes and, coming to the front of the house, again had recourse to her binoculars. The boat was much nearer now, and she could see that it was manned by two women, both of them pulling strongly at the oars.

'The morning watch, as I supposed,' muttered Laura. 'Not too early on the job, either. Wonder whether they're coming up here?'

This, it was soon apparent, was the intention of the newcomers. They beached the boat on a strip of greyish shingle which was just within Laura's view and then she lost sight, but not sound, of them as they began to climb towards her.

‘Come to get themselves chairs,’ she thought. A childish sense of not wanting to be discovered caused her to retreat up the slope towards the cottage. Here she did go inside, but there was nothing of interest, so she went back to the car and continued her drive along the narrow, switch-back road towards what she hoped would be the head of the loch.

As the car made progress, Laura realised that her route was taking her further and further north, which meant that the loch was getting further and further away, so when, at last, her lane joined a wider road, she turned in her tracks and went back by the way she had come. She was due at the inn for lunch at one o’clock, but when she reached the end of the overgrown track which led to the cottage she found herself still with time in hand, so she left the car on the verge, returned to the cottage, passed it and climbed down to the hunting-lodge once more. This time she felt differently about encountering the watchers for, during her drive, she had made up her mind to attempt to trace the route which Angela Barton had traversed on her last and fatal walk, and she thought that the two women, who must be the Benson sisters, might be able to suggest a starting-point for her quest.

There was no sign of them up at the house, but the two folding chairs had gone, so she guessed that these were now lower down the slope, possibly on the edge of the water. She found an easy, winding descent, but, although the chairs were there at the loch-side, the two women were not, and Laura, training her binoculars on to the opposite side of the loch, spotted the boat drawn up below the little pinewood and realised that the Bensons had decided upon a return to the major’s caravan for an early lunch.

She was about to turn and make the ascent back to where she had left the car, when she was aware of a disturbance in the loch. Great circles appeared, as though made by some gigantic fish and, as Laura watched, three dark-grey humps appeared. As nearly as she could judge, they were about thirty yards off shore and each appeared to be about five feet long. They remained motionless for several minutes; so did Laura. She fancied afterwards that she had held her breath all the time, although commonsense told her that this was unlikely.

Whatever breeze had rippled the surface of the water earlier on had died away and a mirror-like calmness was on the face of the loch. The ripples widened in huge, concentric circles, then, as though Laura’s presence had been detected, the dark humps were simultaneously submerged and Laura, coming to, began to wonder (as Sally, earlier, had wondered) whether she had seen what she thought she had seen. She picked up a grey, slimy pebble and shied it into the

loch, but the water retained its tantalising secret and, apart from the disturbance caused by the submergence of the fabulous humps and the lesser ripples caused by her pebble, nothing moved. She sat on a convenient boulder and waited for half-an-hour. Then hunger, and a glance at her watch, put an end to her vigil. Regretfully she climbed the winding path to the house, passed it and made her way back to the cottage and then to the car.

‘I wasn’t “seeing things” then?’ said Sally, who was taking a late lunch with her grandmother and Laura at the inn. ‘I’m so thankful. But you didn’t see the head, you say?’

‘Well, *you* didn’t see the humps,’ retorted Laura.

‘And several of us saw the wake the thing made, earlier on, as it travelled down the loch,’ Sally went on. ‘Oh, I do wish— poor Angela, though,’ she added.

‘You do wish nothing had happened to break up the party,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Well, there is nothing to be done about that, I fear, but there is no reason, if this place can accommodate you both, why you and Laura should not stay on for a bit. Laura needs a holiday and now that you have both been favoured with a sight of something which, for the sake of convenience, we may call the monster, it would be a thousand pities if you came away too soon.’

‘What about you?’ asked Sally.

‘Like the devil (according to St Peter) I shall be walking about, seeking whom I may devour.’

‘Funny thing, but that’s what Nigel said about Angela. Up here, or at home?’

‘Both, I hope. I shall remain here until all our companions have departed and probably stay a few days after that. Then Laura will drive me to Abbotsinch, whence I shall fly to London.’

‘Oh, you can’t leave us here to cope,’ said Laura, who distrusted aeroplanes. ‘Please don’t go. Stay up here with us and let’s all go home together. We’ve got to take the car and Sally’s bus back, anyway, and an extra day or two en route won’t make any difference to your plans, will it? We need not take the train. We’ll go all the way by road.’

‘I notice in you,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘an increasing tendency to make yourself responsible for my conduct and well-being. I suppose you don’t want me to fly.’

‘Bossy is the word for Laura,’ said Sally, ‘but this time I agree with her. It would be much more fun if we all went home together. She doesn’t want a holiday up here and neither do I. It’s ten to one against our seeing any more of

the monster, anyway. I *do* wish one of us had been able to take a photograph, though. It won't be the least use to report my head and neck and Laura's humps without having a picture. Nobody is going to believe us except the experts, and I'm sure they've got similar evidence, lots of it, already.'

'What do you propose to do with yourselves this afternoon?' asked Dame Beatrice.

'I must get my van serviced,' said Sally. 'It's a long trek back for me and the van has done some rough work up here. I suppose you *won't* go by road as well, Grandmamma, as Laura suggested?'

'I see no reason against it. I was in haste to reach you, so we came by train, but a leisurely drive home, with overnight stops, would be most agreeable. This afternoon I want to talk to Mrs Parris. They will be leaving soon, and I would like to catch her before they go.'

'Good,' said Laura. 'That leaves me a free afternoon. I shall borrow the expedition's boat and row over to the island with the ruins unless there is anything useful I can do for you.'

'No, there is nothing. Go off and enjoy yourself.'

Laura, who liked her own company, was in love with islands and relished nothing more than (as she expressed it) poking her nose into things which did not directly concern her, set off on foot as soon as she had dropped Dame Beatrice at Nigel's caravan. She found the boat pulled up on the oozy shore. As it was clear from this that no watch was to be kept that afternoon from the opposite side of the loch, she exerted her considerable strength and, being far more powerfully built than Sally, found no difficulty in launching the bulky craft and getting afloat.

It needed neither a long nor a difficult pull to reach the island. She beached the boat in a tiny cove and splashed ashore, her immediate objective the church tower.

The tower, however, proved not to belong to the church. Laura prowled about the extensive ruins, identified the church itself and discovered that if it had ever possessed a tower this was no longer standing. There was a small belfry, the remains of two Gothic, traceried windows which in England would have belonged to the fourteenth century, what appeared to be the abbot's doorway into the church, two high walls of the cloister, an overgrown square of cloister garth with the remains of a well in the middle of it, the remains of the chapter house and a building with a dividing wall which, since it was on the side of the cloister opposite to, and therefore furthest away from, the church, Laura assumed to be

the roofless remains of the refectory and kitchen. Behind all this was the chief landmark which Sally had noticed, the tower.

Laura scrambled her way towards it. Like all the other remains, it was roofless, but it appeared to have been strongly fortified. It was an uncompromising, square chunk of masonry with window openings all the way up one side on a slant which indicated a staircase. The top of the building was crenellated like the battlements of a castle.

‘The abbot’s lodging,’ said Laura aloud. She stepped in at a ruined doorway and found herself surrounded by paraphernalia which obviously had not derived from the Middle Ages. The floor had been cleared of weeds and at one side of the room, which was well-lighted, being open to the sky, and without most of its west wall, were three large metal tanks. Near these a square of concrete flooring had been laid and leaning against one of the three walls which remained intact were a couple of wooden shovels. To complete the picture of this skeleton of an illicit still for the manufacture, Laura had no doubt, of the whisky, rough and harsh, which Mrs McLauchlin had refused to serve to her visitors, were the remains of a large fire. On the edge of the concrete flooring was a demijohn three-parts full of clear water.

Laura bent and sifted through the ashes of the fire with her fingers, then she stepped out through the remains of the ruined west wall and found two mounds of fuel, one of coke, the other of peat, heaped up under a lean-to to keep them out of the rain. She returned to the interior. Above the remains of the fire was a kiln on a screen of metal.

‘Well!’ said Laura, describing the scene to Dame Beatrice and Sally in the privacy of Dame Beatrice’s bedroom that evening and keeping her voice very low as she enumerated her discoveries. ‘You know what I think now, don’t you?’

‘Tell us,’ urged Sally. ‘I never was any good at guessing-games. You’ve told us what you saw on the island, but it doesn’t mean a thing to me. Has it something to do with Angela Barton’s death? Is that what you mean?’

‘Laura has been describing some of the apparatus necessary for the manufacture of an inferior but potent alcoholic beverage known to the Irish as poteen and to the Scots as pot still,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘What’s more, I know where they stowed the stuff before they sold it to the pub,’ said Laura. ‘I found some casks up at the hunting-lodge when I was there. Oh, and that reminds me. I found an empty bottle, too, but it had contained sparkling burgundy. It had been dropped into one of the casks.’

‘But why is this important, and why are you talking in the tones of a



Gunpowder Plotter?’ asked Sally. ‘I mean, the island is deserted and nobody is making the stuff nowadays.’

‘They were making it not so long ago,’ said Laura, ‘and if that wretched Barton woman had been over there snooping around and was threatening to blackmail the McLauchlins or tell the police, or something of that sort, she might easily have laid herself open to the chance of getting murdered.’

‘So what about you?’ asked Sally, openly amused by Laura’s rhetoric. ‘Won’t you get murdered, too?’

‘All very well to laugh,’ said Laura severely. ‘What I want to know is what we’re going to do about it.’

‘To prevent our own murders?’ asked Sally.

‘Well, the cellar in this pub is probably full of the stuff.’

‘I think,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘that our best plan will be to approach the sinful McLauchlins and confront them with your suspicions. They will hardly murder *three* of us in order to preserve their secret. Besides, it is not as though the still is in working order.’

‘It isn’t much otherwise,’ retorted Laura. ‘There’s the coke and peat for the fire, the kiln for the distilling, the concrete floor—quite intact, I may tell you—for germinating the malted barley, a demijohn of water for the sprinkling and even a couple of wooden shovels for turning the green malt over, as well as three tanks for steeping the barley after it’s been cleaned.’

‘Seems to me that you know more than you ought to about illicit distilling,’ said Sally. Laura waved a shapely palm.

‘The principle is the same, whether the process is legal or or not,’ she said, ‘and naturally I take an interest in my homeland’s most admirable industry.’ She turned to Dame Beatrice. ‘So now for the McLauchlins,’ she added.

‘I shall be interested to hear what they have to say.’

‘And you *do* think Angela might have gone over to the island and seen what I saw, don’t you?’

‘I will not commit myself on that point at present.’

‘There must be pretty heavy penalties for distilling without a licence, you know.’

‘I am sure you are right about that.’

‘And Angela was always finding out horrid facts about people,’ said Sally, who had sobered down. ‘It wouldn’t only be the McLauchlins who could have wanted her out of the way.’

‘We have yet to find out whether they *did* want her out of the way,’ said

Dame Beatrice.

‘I’ll go along and sort them,’ said Laura. She found Mrs McLauchlin in the bar, but otherwise it was empty.

‘And whit can I dae for ye, Mistress Gavin?’ asked the landlord’s wife, with her usual beaming smile.

‘I’ll have a dram,’ Laura replied, ‘of the kind you serve to the shepherds.’

‘Och, no, then, ye wull not! Pot still is no for the likes o’ yoursel’, Mistress Gavin.’

‘Why, what’s the matter with it?’

‘Naething’s the maitter wi’ it, ye ken, but, all the same, ye’ll be getting the malt, as before.’

‘At three times the price?’

‘Aye.’ She looked amiable but determined.

‘But why?’

‘Ye’ve no the stomach for pot still.’

‘Try me and see. How long has the island been out of business?’

‘Oh, lang syne, maybe. Whit way wud ye be speiring aboot the wee inch? Ye’ll hae been thereaboot, I’ll be thinking.’

‘I have, and I know what I saw there.’

‘Aye. It’s a peety, a sair peety.’

‘What is?’

‘That the pollis had tae be tellt.’

‘Oh? When was this?’

Mrs McLauchlin sighed.

‘We thocht—ma guidmon and I—it micht be best to let Inspector McMurdo know that the cellar here, when we took the place three years syne, was weel stocked wi’ whit ye ken.’

‘Oh, you told the police, did you?’

‘We did that, being law-abiding folks and no wishing to be in trouble.’

‘So what happened?’

‘Och, McMurdo is a senseeable body. He said he wad investigate, and no to say onything to onybody, but to sell off what we had and he wad see tae it that the island revairted tae its former lonesomeness.’

‘And no other action was taken?’

‘We haired nae mair aboot the matter. Inspector McMurdo is guidmon tae ma ain sister, ye ken.’

‘So the still hasn’t operated for three years?’

‘I widna gae sae far as that, Mistress Gavin. Inspector McMurdo kens fu’ weel that the fishers and the shepherds maun hae their dram. Shutting down the still was what ye micht ca’ a gradual process, but it was speeded up when we kenned there was tae be Sir Humphrey’s search for the monster. The English dinna understand drenk.’

‘I wouldn’t like to bet on that. Do you mean you didn’t want to poison them? Anyway, look here, suppose some ill-disposed person had found the remains of the still, as I did when I was poking about on the island, and had told, or threatened to tell, the authorities, would that person have run into trouble with, well, with any of the people of these parts?’

‘Och, no! The still was nae mair, and the pollis kenned a’ aboot it lang syne. Speir at ma guidmon gin ye’ll not believe me.’

‘Oh, I believe you all right,’ said Laura. ‘Well, produce your beastly expensive malt if you won’t let me save my bawbees.’

‘Na, na. Ye shall drenk on the hoose, Mistress Gavin. You and ma’sel are weel agreed, I’ll be thinking.’

‘Oh, well, many thanks. That’s very kind of you. *Slainte!* By the way, there *is* something in the loch, isn’t there?’

‘An otter, maybe. Ye’ll no credit Sir Humphrey and a’ his hawering?’

‘About a monster? Oh, but I do.’

‘Aweel, oorselves we want nae truck wi’ it.’

‘You mean you *didn’t* want any truck with it while the illicit still was going strong, don’t you?’ said Laura. ‘It might pay you to believe in it now. Attract the tourists, you know.’

Mrs McLauchlin held on to the bar counter and rocked with happy laughter.

‘So the McLauchlins are right out of it, I think,’ said Laura. ‘We don’t even know that Angela Barton ever set foot on the island, anyway. The chances are that she didn’t. That boat is heavy to launch and a weighty old tub to row. Even if she *had* gone over there, she might not have recognised that the remains were those of an illicit still.’

‘And as the police already knew all about the still,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘she could not have been murdered for threatening to report it. Yes, you have made your point.’

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## CHAPTER 15

### With Beaded Bubbles

‘Turn down an empty glass.’

*Edward Fitzgerald.*



Well,’ said Laura, ‘now we can be certain that the illicit still had nothing to do with the murder, what really interests me is why three different methods of killing were involved. There’s the strychnine—it’s actually named in the report in a Glasgow newspaper Mrs McLauchlin showed me—there’s the throat-wound, and there’s the fact that the body must have been at some time in the loch, but whether before or after the death nobody seems to have mentioned, although I suppose the police know. Anyway, why didn’t the murderer simply drown the poor woman? If a gaff or a boat hook made that wound in her throat, surely it would have been easy enough to hold her under water long enough to do the trick? If she’d met her death by drowning there might not have been any reason to suspect murder at all.’

‘But the authorities do not suspect murder,’ Dame Beatrice pointed out. ‘According to Sir Humphrey, with whom I have had further conversation, they believe that Miss Barton made two abortive attempts at suicide before she finished up by poisoning herself. The medical report is that there was water in the lungs...’

‘Means she wasn’t dead when somebody put her in the loch.’

‘Or when she put herself in. Sir Humphrey tells me that the police theory is that she threw herself into the water but, being a swimmer, could not find the resolution deliberately to drown herself.’

‘All the same,’ argued Laura, ‘the water in the loch is absolutely freezing cold. You’d risk heart-failure, I should think, going into it. I can well believe that she wasn’t dead when they chunked her in. All I can’t understand is why they didn’t just leave her there. Even if there had been no water in the lungs, the doctors would assume that she died of shock and exposure. It’s been known to happen to people in these Highland lochs, you know.’

‘It seems to me,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘that the immersion of the body in the loch could well have been accidental.’

‘You mean she slipped and tumbled in?’

‘No. I think the chances are that she had been poisoned before she reached the other side of the loch and that, in removing the helpless but not quite dead body from the boat, the murderer let it fall.’

‘But it would only have fallen into shallow water, so why gaff it?’

‘To give the impression of attempted suicide, I suppose,’ said Sally. ‘I know why they carried it up to the cottage, though. They hoped it wouldn’t be found, or, at any rate, not for a very long time. You see, the plan—Sir Humphrey’s plan—was that the investigation with regard to the monster should last for a couple of months. If Angela failed to turn up again at the caravan for her supper, Lady Calshott would have suggested to the others that Angela had simply gone home. She was due to go the next day or so, anyway, and she was utterly cheesed off with Sir Humphrey, who wanted her to do another short stint of watching at the tent.’

‘Wouldn’t they have expected a letter to say that she had arrived home, though?’ asked Laura.

‘You didn’t know Angela. She wouldn’t have bothered, I’m sure, and the Calshotts would know that, and be quite unsuspicious until they themselves got home nearly two months later.’

‘But the letter which the vicar is supposed to have written? Why have forged that, if the body was not to be found?’ asked Sally.

‘Written by someone who was anxious to allow for all contingencies, but who was not capable of logical thought, perhaps,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Meaning what, Grandmamma?’

‘That if the body had been in the water, the letter ought to have been immersed at the same time. It was extremely careless to leave a perfectly dry letter beside a saturated, clothed body. In fact, if murder needs to be proved, I should say that goes a long way towards proving it.’

‘Shall you point that out to the police?’

‘They will have thought of it for themselves, and may have found their own explanation for it.’

‘But they’re letting everybody go home!’

‘Be calm, and wait upon events. Since there appears to be nothing useful we can do here, I think we ourselves may well make tracks for home very soon.’

‘And when we get there?’

‘I shall have a word with our dear Robert, Laura’s husband, and then I shall institute a few guarded enquiries of my own, since I know the people involved.’

‘I’ve thought of something I ought to have mentioned sooner,’ said Laura suddenly. ‘It had quite slipped my mind until now. You remember the thermos flask and its metal cup or cap? Well, that other thing I found in the cellar of the hunting-lodge, that bottle, don’t you know. It couldn’t have been there long, because, when I up-ended it, I could see that there was still a drop or two of wine left in it.’

‘So the cork had been replaced,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Yes. There were some empty casks still reeking a bit of spirits, and there was this bottle in one of them, labelled sparkling burgundy.’

‘There’s nothing much in that,’ said Sally. ‘Sir Humphrey dished out a couple of bottles to each caravan party to celebrate any sighting of the monster. Phyllis wanted ours opened at lunch one day, though, so we had it and she got a bit tiddly and slept it off in the afternoon when she and I were on tent-watch. I daresay others had the same inspiration. The watching bored everybody, I think.’

‘Could you find this empty bottle again, do you think?’ asked Dame Beatrice, addressing Laura.

‘I suppose so. I only chucked it into some bushes. But it won’t tell you anything, you know. The strychnine was in the coffee in the thermos flask.’

‘If there was also strychnine in the burgundy it would open up an interesting line of thought, though. The thermos flask as an agent of death has been suspect all along, since I understood it was pretty well established that Angela Barton never burdened herself with such an encumbrance.’

‘Do you want me to row across and find the bottle?’

‘It would oblige me if you would. Take Sally with you to help with the boat.’

‘Not you as well?’

‘No. I have some telephoning to do.’ She saw the two young women off and then went into the post-office and rang up the police.

‘We considered the matter of the letter,’ said the quiet voice at the other end of the line, ‘but the Fiscal decided it was so strong in evidence that the puir body took her ain life that the suicide verdict must stand. He contended that the letter may well have been dropped in the cottage *before* she tried the methods she did, and then, finding she hadna the will-power either to cut her throat or meet her death by drooning, she returned to the but-an’ ben for the strychnine, putting it off to the last because she kenned what a terrible death she had prepared for herself.’

‘Well, I follow his reasoning, Inspector, but it does not satisfy me. The letter, as I informed you earlier, is believed to be a forgery. Has he considered that?’

‘I canna answer on his behalf. All I can say is that we believe the evidence in favour of the puir body’s having killed herself is quite impossible to ignore.’

On Sally’s advice they left Dame Beatrice’s car in the inn yard and Sally drove Laura as far along the south shore of the loch as the motorised caravan could go. It seemed strange to Sally to pass neither caravans nor tents, but the boat was still there and they pushed off, scrambled in and Laura took the oars. The actual distance across the loch at this point was a bare half-mile, but it was a slanting pull to reach the point nearest to the hunting-lodge and this increased the distance quite considerably.

The weather, which had improved since the drenching storm which had caused Sally to seek shelter in the croft cottage where she had discovered the body, had deteriorated again. The sky was dark, the mountains a threatening purple, and the surface of the loch was now ruffled by a wind which had sprung up just as they had reached the pine-wood and the boat.

‘Not much chance of seeing the monster today,’ said Sally. ‘It prefers fine weather and a flat calm.’

Laura nodded and continued with her powerful, unhurried rowing. They beached the boat below the house and, in the fine rain which had begun to drift from the west on the wind, they followed the well-trodden, easy path from the shore up to the hunting-lodge.

‘This is where I tossed the bottle,’ said Laura. She crouched and began to grope among the wet bushes. ‘Yes, here we are. Don’t suppose it’s of the slightest importance, but Dame Beatrice wants to see it, although I expect I’ve man-handled it sufficiently to have mucked up anybody else’s fingerprints.’

‘It couldn’t matter very much if you have,’ said Sally, inspecting the treasure. ‘This is bound to be a bottle from Sir Humphrey’s stock—same wine, same firm of bottlers and all that—so he will have handled it for certain, so will his retailer and others in the trade, and so, probably, will four other people, those to whom he gave the bottle, you know.’

‘Including, perhaps, the Benson sisters,’ said Laura, ‘since they were in charge of this beat when Angela Barton died.’

‘Yes, but not for long,’ said Sally. ‘Before that, there were Nigel Parris’s lot. They are *far* more likely to have brought a bottle of wine over here than the Bensons are. The Bensons did take the job seriously. Nigel, Marjorie and Jeremy certainly didn’t. I couldn’t answer for Hubert Pring, but he and Marjorie never

came over here together, so far as I know.'

'Oh, well, you know them all, and I don't. Shall we be getting back?'

'How long does it take for anybody to die of strychnine poisoning?' asked Sally.

'I put that to your grandmother, but you know what doctors are. She called canny and talked about dosage, precipitates, age and infirmity, allergies, Uncle Tom Cobby and all. All I gathered was that death caused by taking strychnine isn't necessarily immediate. I mean, it isn't like taking hydrocyanic acid, for example, which can pop you off, I believe, in a matter of seconds.'

'I see. So Angela Barton's death wouldn't have been all that quick. What a monster the murderer must be! Oh, well, let's present Grandmamma with your bottle, and see what she makes of it. Fingerprints wouldn't help, anyway, if the police didn't take any. They wouldn't, would they, since they think it was suicide? Well, only Angela's own, perhaps.'

'I think they might try to track down the source of the poison. It's not easy stuff to get hold of.'

'She could have got hold of it from Nigel, perhaps. He's a veterinary surgeon and can get it, same as a doctor can. If Angela could have got it from him, so could the murderer.'

'Oh, Lord! Had Nigel himself got anything against Angela?'

'It strikes me that everybody had something against her, because she was such a snake that she might have got hold of something even to my discredit, although I can't think what it would be. Marjorie would be a likely victim, because there's no doubt Angela knew she'd been having some sort of an affair with Jeremy, and I know how jealous and possessive Nigel is. They had a quarrel about it when they rowed over to our tent one afternoon when I was alone on duty there. Actually, Angela once hinted to me of dreadful things about Nigel, things I would have known nothing about if I hadn't read some of Daddy's stuff on forensic medicine.'

'I thought Sir Ferdinand was a lawyer. Is he a doctor as well?'

'No, but he knows what doctors have to know about the law.'

'But if Angela Barton—wasn't she about forty-five?'

'Yes, I believe so.'

'Well, if a woman of that age began spreading that sort of tale about Nigel, people would just assume she was suffering change-of-life dottiness, wouldn't they?'

'It still wouldn't be very pleasant for Nigel, would it? You know what



gossips people are, especially in a village.'

'So she could have harmed him, if she'd been spiteful enough, on two counts, Marjorie and Jeremy being the other. But what would she have got out of it?'

'Nothing but the satisfaction of spreading alarm and despondency, I imagine. I think she had the sort of lust for power that I suppose poison-pen writers have.'

'How did your telephoning go?' asked Laura, when she had handed over the bottle to Dame Beatrice.

'The Fiscal is convinced that Angela Barton committed suicide. The police, I presume, have established that she received a letter that day...'

'She did get one,' said Sally. 'She picked it up at the post-office. You know, Grandmamma, I begin to be sorry I started all this. Suppose there is nothing in my suspicions after all, and the police and the Fiscal are right and there isn't a case to go to the Sheriff? After all, there is very little to go on in thinking it was murder, and plenty to justify a verdict of suicide. Mightn't it be better to drop our enquiry and leave things alone?'

'All very well, unless the murderer strikes again,' said Laura.

'How do you mean?' asked Sally.

'Well, that strychnine had to come from somewhere, and my bet is that it didn't come directly from a chemist. Ask Mrs Croc and she'll tell you it's most difficult stuff to get hold of, unless you're a doctor or otherwise qualified to have it, and we do know of somebody in Sir Humphrey's party who was.'

'You're thinking of Nigel, but he'd never have given it to anybody. He wouldn't have dared and, if he's the murderer, he wouldn't need to hand it over, anyway.'

'Let us re-examine our reasons for suspecting that Miss Barton did not commit suicide, but was murdered,' said Dame Beatrice, 'and then the next thing is to submit Laura's beaded bubbles for analysis.'

'Will analysis be difficult?' asked Laura.

'Oh, no, strangely simple. If the analyst can isolate the crystals of strychnine, he has only to add a minute quantity of  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  and then touch the solution with a crystal of  $\text{K}_2\text{Cr}_{207}$ . This will cause the strychnine to turn purple, the purple will fade to rose-colour and this will then disappear.'

'But the wine itself is between dark red and rose colour,' said Sally. 'Won't that make a difference?'

'Then they may try a drop of the wine on a harmless, necessary frog,' said Dame Beatrice. 'Unkind but, I believe, infallible, since a frog is known to

respond to a solution of one five-thousandth of a grain of strychnine.'

Sally groaned.

'I loathe using animals for experiments,' she said.

'In the laboratory to which I shall send Laura's bottle, the frog will be narcotised and its stomach washed out and chloral or bromide left *in situ*. This is not done, I hasten to add, for humane reasons, but it is a recognised treatment for those who have taken strychnine accidentally or suicidally and is invariably practised on all subjects concerned with the laboratory's experiments in order to make sure that the treatment works.'

'So glad they're not sentimentalists,' said Sally bitterly.

The result of the laboratory tests on the bottle salvaged by Laura was sent to Dame Beatrice a week later. There were positive traces of strychnine in the few drops of wine it contained.

'Something definite to show the police at last!' exclaimed Laura. 'Then we can leave them to it, I hope, and take ourselves home. Mrs McLauchlin's cooking is all very well if you're passionately fond of cockaleekie soup and everlasting mutton, but I begin to find myself hankering after Henri's inspired French menus and I wouldn't mind tucking myself up again in my own bed.'

'And so you shall, and that right soon,' Dame Beatrice promised her.

'After you've shown that bottle to the police?'

'The laboratory is doing that, so that no unauthorised person meanwhile has access to it. What I should like to establish, before we leave Tannasgan, is where the bottle came from after Sir Humphrey presented it to some of the watchers. I think that might be useful, and there Sally can be of help. What was done, Sally, about the disposal of waste matter while the party was up here?'

'I can only answer for Sir Humphrey's gang. We dug a bumby-hole and buried everything.'

'That calls for excavation, then. I am sure one of the villagers will lend us a spade.'

'Mrs McLauchlin's husband will,' said Laura. 'What excuse shall I offer?'

'That Sally took off a gold bracelet when she was about to do the washing-up and thinks it must have been collected in with the rubbish and thrown away.'

'A bit late in the day for her to have thought of that, isn't it?'

'She didn't think of it. You suggested it to her, and she thinks it is worth a try.'

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## CHAPTER 16

### Excavations and Enquiries

‘Mr Messiter. Mr Philip Hays, and Mr Holton of Mag. Coll. spent the evening with me, and sat up till 2 o’clock in the morning... Had 6 bottles of my wine.’

*Parson James Woodforde.*



Mrs McLauchlin did not laugh this time, but listened with sympathetic clickings of the tongue to Laura’s story and, at the end of it, her husband promised not only a spade, but the potboy to do the digging. With some difficulty Laura side-stepped this kindly offer, the spade was produced and Sally took her two companions to the burial-ground of Sir Humphrey’s empty tins, bottles and kitchen refuse.

Here, conspicuous among the débris, were two wine bottles. Dame Beatrice, who had come prepared, labelled them with Sir Humphrey’s name and the date, and they drove to where the second caravan had been parked, its wheel-marks plainly to be seen in the soft soil.

‘Here’s where it’s going to be difficult,’ said Sally, ‘because two lots used this caravan and both will have buried rubbish.’

‘Then we must excavate carefully,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Why not try the further site first?’ suggested Laura. ‘If we find two bottles there, we can conclude that any bottles buried here belong to the major.’

‘I am afraid there is a flaw in that argument. It depends upon Mr Parris and his party having drunk their burgundy before they shifted camp. Nevertheless, it is a sensible suggestion and is well worth trying out.’

At the furthest caravan site two different mentalities had been at work. All the kitchen refuse had been placed in bags (‘brought by Hubert Pring, I’ll bet,’ said Sally) and neatly buried and the dug-out earth replaced with finicking neatness. In the bushes nearby, however, were empty beer-cans imported (Sally said) by Jeremy and Nigel and carelessly flung out when they had served their

purpose. The two wine-bottles had followed suit. Laura preened herself when they were disclosed and Dame Beatrice labelled and dated them and placed them with the others in the back of Sally's van.

'The *assumption* is that they belonged to Mr Parris,' she said, 'but we cannot take it as a certainty.'

'Have faith, dear Grandmamma,' said Sally. 'Even if the major might chuck empty bottles into bushes, I'm sure his wife and the Bensons wouldn't have left them there.'

But this point was not resolved. The most resolute excavation at the last, actually the middle, caravan site when they revisited it, disclosed no bottles at all.

'Needs some enquiring into, that,' said Laura, leaning on the spade when she had tidied up the ground after her labours. 'Well, I'm for some lunch, and then what about telephoning Glasgow for tonight's beds and beginning the long trek home?'

'Did you hae guid luck, then?' asked Mrs McLauchlin, who served them in person with lunch. For answer Sally displayed an elegant gold bracelet (on loan from her grandmother's jewel-box) and said that she had indeed been lucky. An hour later she was in her motorised caravan and, with Laura at the wheel of Dame Beatrice's car, they were on the first leg of their homeward journey when Sally flagged down the following vehicle and Laura pulled up.

'What now?' she enquired, when she had wound down her window.

'Sorry and all that, but we've loads of time to get to Glasgow, so would you mind waiting while I go as far as where we had our tent? I'd like to say goodbye to the monster. I don't suppose I'll ever be this way again.'

She drove off, crossed the little stone bridge, passed the site where Sir Humphrey's caravan had been parked and took the van as far along the side of the loch as she could. Then she walked, not as far as where the tent itself had been pitched, but to the spot, as nearly as she could judge, at which the monster had reared its head out of the water.

The early afternoon was calm and fair. The surface of the loch was still and it was slightly shimmering in hazy, indeterminate sunshine. The distant mountains loomed like powerful but beneficent gods and all around and about there was silence until Sally spoke.

'Well, hail and farewell,' she said. 'I'm glad I had a glimpse of you, anyway. Look after yourself and don't swallow any spiny sticklebacks.' Then she spat into the water for luck and turned and walked back to the van, glancing now and

again over her shoulder. The loch remained tranquil. Leviathan, presumably, slept.

A leisurely drive home, with overnight stops in Glasgow, Kendal, Leicester and Witney, brought the car and the motorised caravan back to the Stone House.

‘And now to get our priorities right,’ said Laura, on the following morning.

‘We begin with Major and Mrs Tamworth and the Benson sisters,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘The Bensons first, I suppose,’ said Sally.

‘It matters little. From your account of the various parties, the major’s weak link is his downtrodden wife and Godiva’s lesser partner is her sister.’

‘It’s going to be a bit tricky asking them to account for a couple of wine bottles, isn’t it? We’ve found five empties, including the one Laura found up at the hunting-lodge, so one of the major’s party has to explain away that one and then produce or otherwise account for the missing one. How are you going to approach the subject? He’ll see at once that you suspect some hanky-panky, won’t he?’

‘Especially if he’s got a guilty conscience,’ said Laura.

‘I don’t believe he has. I don’t believe he had anything against Angela Barton except that he detested her on the usual grounds that everybody disliked her,’ said Sally. ‘For my money, the Bensons are far more suspect than he is. They really *did* have a motive for wanting Angela out of the way and, if you ask me, Godiva has a strong enough character to take the obvious course and murder the woman if that was the only way to get her out of the vicarage.’

‘Very well. We begin with the Benson sisters,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘although, really, you know, if the bottles of wine were handed to the major as leader of his small party of four, I do not see him handing them over to two spinsters who may not even care for alcoholic beverages.’

‘Everybody cares for alcoholic beverages in this day and age,’ declared Sally. ‘The Bensons aren’t living with the March family from *Little Women*.’

‘Even *they* drank wine on occasion,’ said Laura. ‘Wasn’t old Mr Lawrence asked to produce “a couple of bottles of old wine” for Mr March when he was ill, and didn’t Meg drink champagne at the Moffats’ house-party ball, and isn’t there a reference somewhere else in the saga to the family “drinking a toast” to someone or something?’

‘Well, *Cranford*, then,’ said Sally.

‘Home-made wine, I’ll wager ten shekels,’ said Laura, ‘although I can’t at the moment quote an instance. All the same, I bet the Cranford ladies had their

cowslip wine and their ginger wine and their elderberry ditto stashed away in the cupboard under the stairs ready for the burials and christenings.'

'There weren't any christenings in Cranford,' said Sally. 'Babies were an indelicate subject among the ladies there. How are you going to tackle the Bensons, Grandmamma?'

'By the way of Major Tamworth, to begin with.'

'Do you want me to go with you?' asked Sally.

'Neither you nor Laura. I shall make no secret of the object of my visit. Nothing, at this early stage, is to be gained by subterfuge.'

Immediately after lunch she sent for her car and George, her chauffeur, and was driven the forty miles which lay between the Stone House and Sir Humphrey's residence. Here she made enquiry of the maid who answered the door and by whom she was recognised immediately.

'No, I need not trouble the family this time,' she said in answer to the woman's enquiry. 'No doubt you can direct me to Major Tamworth's house.'

'You've come past it, mum, I daresay, if you've come from the Forest direction. It lays back a piece from the road and is called Dunkirk Lodge. The name is cut on the pillars which hold up the gate.'

The major was at home and affected delight.

'Good show, Dame Beatrice,' he said. 'Nice to see you again so soon. You must have some tea. She must have some tea, Catherine.'

'Yes, of course, dear. I had better go to the kitchen myself, as Mabel will not be expecting to get tea ready at three in the afternoon.'

'My wife will never learn how to manage servants,' said the major, when she had gone out of the room, 'and if I take over and, well, bark at 'em a bit, the undisciplined fools give in their notice and then it's the very devil of a job these days to get replacements. Damn' girls seem to think it's beneath them to put on a cap and apron and wait on people. Who do they think they are, for heaven's sake?'

Dame Beatrice agreed that servants were a problem, but forbore to mention how long her own had been with her. Instead she said, 'You will have guessed, Major, that I had an object in calling upon you so soon after your return from Tannasgan.'

'Why, as to that, no need for an excuse, dear lady. Always pleased to see you, *always!*'

'Thank you. I may tell you, however, that doubts have arisen as to the way in which Miss Barton met her death.'

‘Eh? Doubts? Thought the doctors were satisfied the wretched—the poor woman did for herself with poison. Rotten way to go, but there it is.’

‘There is no doubt about the poison, but it is no longer thought that the thermos flask of coffee was the vehicle.’

‘Not? Oh, well, I can’t see it’s all that important, what? I mean, poison’s poison, whatever she chose to take it in.’

‘Not to beat about the bush, Major, the latest theory is that Miss Barton was not responsible for her own death.’

‘*What!* You don’t mean...?’

‘It is only a theory, of course, but it will be investigated, if only in the interests of the people who went with Sir Humphrey to Tannasgan.’

‘But what gave rise to such an idea? I thought it was certain...’

‘So did the Scottish police, but since her death it has come to one’s notice that Miss Barton had made enemies. She seems to have ferreted out various secrets which might have damaged various people had she chosen to broadcast them.’

‘Hm!’ said the major, blowing out his moustache. ‘Yes, indeed. See what you mean. But why come to me? I can’t tell you anything. Anyway, it isn’t your business, exactly, is it?’

‘Oh, yes, it is. I am accredited to the Home Office and it is thought, at this juncture, that some discreet enquiries made by a psychiatrist may be better than sending police to ask questions of innocent people.’

‘Sounds a bit peculiar to me.’

‘Yes,’ said Dame Beatrice, who had been afraid that it would. ‘All the same, I am sure that you yourself would prefer to have a casual caller like myself rather than a poker-faced detective in a trench coat and a battered Homburg hat.’

‘Oh, well, yes, I’ll certainly agree with you there. See what you’re getting at. Yes.’

‘Especially as suicide still cannot be ruled out,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Well, the only vehicle which could have served to mask, to some extent, the bitter flavour of the poison, was, of course, coffee. On the other hand, to one unaccustomed to wine, a glass of burgundy might have been taken without suspicion. My present task, therefore, is to go the rounds of the Tannasgan party to find out, if I can, where and on what occasion Miss Barton would have been offered the wine.’

‘But she’d have had it with Calshott and *his* gang. She roosted in his caravan, damn it!’

‘I understand that, once Miss Phyllis Calshott arrived on the scene, Miss Barton became a wanderer and, anxious as she seems to have been to learn all she could about her companions, may have called, on various pretexts, at the other caravans and may have been offered hospitality at one of them.’

‘Includin’ a pot of poison, eh?’

‘As I explained, it is only a theory that she may have been murdered. In any case, we want to trace where the poison came from and whether it could have been offered in a glass of wine.’

‘Ah, then I may as well give myself a clean bill of health, so to speak.’ He got up and went over to a sideboard cupboard. ‘Here’s *my* alibi,’ he said briskly. ‘None of us touched the stuff.’ He produced two full bottles whose labels Dame Beatrice immediately recognised, and he had just returned them to the cupboard when his wife preceded a maid who was bringing in the tea.

‘Oh, well,’ said Sally, ‘it was only to be expected that the major would be out of it. He and his wife were about the only two people except, I suppose, for the Calshotts, who had nothing to hide.’

‘So far as you know,’ Laura pointed out. ‘How about the others? We know about the Bensons, of course, but what had the other caravan party to be afraid of? I mean, that hint she gave you about Nigel’s peculiarities is so foul that she’d have done her own reputation more harm than his if she’d dared to make it public. As for an affair between Marjorie Parris and Jeremy Tamworth, well, from what you’ve told us, it seems that Nigel knew, or, at any rate, had suspected that something was going on there, and, anyway, is it, in these promiscuous days, really a motive for murder?’

‘Well, it could be,’ said Sally, ‘but, if it was, you’d think Nigel would murder Jeremy or Marjorie or both, not Angela, who was merely spreading the rumour.’

‘I can’t help wondering about the Calshotts,’ said Laura. ‘Couldn’t they do with a long, hard look? Didn’t you say that Angela Barton had money to leave? How well off is Sir Humphrey and what expectations had Phyllis Calshott got?’

‘Yes, the Calshotts are in the forefront of my mind,’ Dame Beatrice agreed, ‘and they will not be left out of our calculations. But now for the vicarage.’

‘Whatever for?’

‘To obtain the Bensons’ address.’

‘You could have asked the maid at the Calshotts’ or the major himself, couldn’t you?’

‘I do not want to stir up too much curiosity.’

Laura grinned.



‘A dirty great limousine which calls first on the Calshotts, then on the Tamworths, then at the vicarage and then on the Bensons is quite unlikely to cause speculation in the village, of course,’ she said. Dame Beatrice cackled.

‘I have an idea that the Bensons may be at the vicarage, you know. It is quite likely,’ she said.

George pulled up outside the church, for the vicarage was next to the churchyard, and the door was opened by Godiva Benson. ‘Ah, how convenient!’ Dame Beatrice exclaimed. ‘Two, or is it three, birds with one stone.’

‘If you wanted to see the vicar, he is out,’ said Godiva, ‘but I’m sure he would wish me to ask you in, Dame Beatrice. Winfrith and I are acting as temporary housekeepers and maids-of-all-work, except for a charwoman, until a suitable replacement can be found for Angela Barton.’

‘A most tragic and unfortunate woman,’ said Dame Beatrice, following Godiva to the room in which the vicar had received her on her previous visit.

‘Unfortunate, perhaps,’ said Godiva. ‘I do not see her as a tragic figure, though. She was far too much of a mischief-maker to be granted the dignity of such a term. Winfrith, here is Dame Beatrice. I expect she would like a cup of tea. We can make fresh for Esmond when he comes in. His hours are always erratic. You must try to persuade him to be more punctual and meticulous when you are married.’

Winfrith, a somewhat wraith-like figure compared with her more vigorous and determined sister, rose from her basket-chair and came forward.

‘Nice to see you,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry Esmond is out.’

‘I came only to ask him for your address,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘and to tell him—perhaps you would be kind enough to give him the message if I leave before he returns—that the matter of the forged letter is quite cleared up.’

‘The forged letter? What forged letter?’ said Godiva sharply. Her sister returned to the basket-chair, sat down and put a hand theatrically to her heart.

‘I think there is only one forged letter which is known to both of us,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Yes, but we did not give it to her,’ said Godiva. ‘How did you know we wrote it?’

‘I found out that it did not come from the vicar, as it purported to do, and I could think of nobody except yourselves who had both a motive and the technical skill to write such a letter.’

‘Technical skill?’

‘Forgery is a form of art, is it not?’

Godiva laughed.

‘I had never thought of it as such,’ she said, ‘but I suppose you are perfectly right. However, as I say, we did not give Angela Barton the letter.’

‘Then why did you write it?’

‘For fun,’ said Godiva, eyeing her steadily. ‘We never had the slightest idea that she would ever peruse it.’

‘Then how did it come to be found on the floor of that cottage beside her dead body?’

‘I can only assume that she found it when she visited our caravan, read it and purloined it.’

‘Why should she do that?’

‘To make trouble between us and Esmond,’ said Winfrith, who seemed to have regained her composure by reason of her sister’s bold and uncompromising attitude. ‘She had only to show him the letter. He would have been very angry with us, very angry indeed.’

‘Would he have believed that you were the authors?’

‘He would have challenged us, I suppose, and we should not have attempted to deny that we wrote it. It is not in our nature to resort to lies or to any form of subterfuge to save ourselves from embarrassment or distress.’

‘Did you provide an envelope with the letter?’

‘Certainly not. We never intended to send it, did we, Godiva?’

‘What did you mean by saying that you wrote the letter for fun?’ Dame Beatrice enquired, looking at Godiva.

‘Perhaps “fun” is not the *mot juste*. Perhaps I should have said “wishful thinking”. Would that please you better?’

‘It might be nearer the truth, for which your sister claims that you have complete regard.’

‘*Was* an envelope found with the letter?’ asked Winfrith suddenly.

‘I have no idea. If you will excuse me for a moment, though, I can soon tell you.’ She went out to the car, to find Laura and Sally in conversation with the vicar. ‘Ah,’ she said, ‘well met. I have been calling on you.’

‘I am sorry I was not at home to receive you.’

‘I am in the middle of an intriguing conversation with Miss Godiva and Miss Winfrith Benson and it has reached the stage of reference to the letter about which, if you remember, I spoke to you some time ago.’

‘I remember perfectly. I have been thinking over our little talk and I have come to the conclusion that poor Miss Barton must have written the letter herself

in order to account for her suicide. At some time she must have borrowed a sheet of my headed notepaper—she was often good enough to undertake secretarial work for me...

‘I do not think she wrote the letter. Sally, you were the first person to see it. Was it in an envelope?’

‘No, but there was an envelope on the floor near it.’

‘Stamped?’

‘Oh, yes, and postmarked, but naturally it was the letter itself which interested me.’

‘You did not notice the postmark?’

‘Except to realise that it had one.’

‘And you are quite certain that there was an envelope and that it was postmarked?’

‘I’m certain of both. You know what *I* think, Grandmamma? I think somebody found the letter which I saw Angela pick up at the post-office that morning, destroyed it, and kept the envelope to make it look as though the forged letter had come by post.’

‘That means the murder was premeditated,’ said Laura. ‘Ugly stuff, whatever way you look at it.’

‘Well,’ said the vicar, ‘won’t you all come in and have some tea?’

‘Well!’ said Sally, when, having eaten nothing at the major’s and refused the vicar’s hospitable offer, the three were enjoying a cream tea in the mill-house just outside the village. ‘Do we ask how you got on at the vicarage, Grandmamma?’

‘I hardly know,’ Dame Beatrice replied. ‘There is no doubt that the twin sisters wrote the letter you found. They admit as much. They deny, however, that they provided an envelope, or ever intended to give the letter to Miss Barton. The evidence that they wrote it lies in their own admission and is merely evidence, so far, of their own sentiments in that they would have liked the vicar to have written such a letter.’

‘But do you believe them?’

‘That they did not give the letter to Miss Barton? Yes, I do, and on two counts. I don’t believe they would have played such a cruel trick on her, not because it was cruel, but because it could be proved so easily that the vicar did not write the letter. Apart from that, there is still the extraordinary fact that the body had been in the water and the letter had not.’

‘I thought that had been discussed.’

‘But not satisfactorily explained.’

‘If the twins wrote the letter and are telling the truth when they say they didn’t give it to Angela, then they must have shown it to somebody else,’ said Laura.

‘That is the explanation, I have no doubt.’

‘So the murderer got hold of the letter and planted it beside the body to indicate that Angela Barton had committed suicide,’ said Sally. ‘If so, though, why on earth didn’t he, she or (as *I* think) *they*, at least dip the letter in water?’

‘Because the words might have become indecipherable and the purpose of the letter lost, I imagine.’

‘But if the Bensons are in the clear, who could have got hold of the letter? I really can’t believe they would have shown it, or given it away.’

‘We will ask for their address at the village post-office and I will call on them this evening after they return home. They will hardly be spending the night at the vicarage until one of them marries the incumbent.’

‘You know,’ said Sally, ‘I’m not so sure I like all this stuff about their innocence. *They* admit they wrote the letter and *I* know they were up at the hunting-lodge on the day that Angela Barton died. Why *shouldn’t* they be guilty? They had motive and opportunity enough, goodness knows!’

‘You are right, but we have still to establish that they had the means, by which I mean the strychnine.’

‘Perhaps they’ve got moles in their garden,’ said Laura. ‘Didn’t I read somewhere or other that mole-catchers are allowed strychnine, or some compound of it, for their job?’

‘Then we had better carry out a survey of the Benson sisters’ garden in quest of mole-hills,’ said Dame Beatrice solemnly.

‘All very well for you to laugh! All right, then, let’s buzz back to the post-office, hoping it won’t have closed for the night, and get the address and go and take a butchers before you talk to them again.’

This procedure was carried out. Dame Beatrice remained in the car while Laura and Sally, in the full light of a fine late afternoon which was still sunny and warm, inspected a blameless lawn and, at the back of the cottage, a small kitchen garden.

‘Clean as a whistle,’ said Laura, when they returned to the car. ‘What now? Do we hang about until they choose to come home? Could be that they’re staying to supper at the vicarage, you know.’

‘Then we will drive back to the vicarage.’

It proved unnecessary to trouble the vicar a second time, for they met the sisters coming away from the vicarage. Laura pulled up and Dame Beatrice got out.

‘There is one thing I forgot to ask you. You denied that you gave the letter to Angela Barton, but did you show or give the letter to anybody else?’

‘We did show it to Marjorie Parris,’ said Godiva. ‘She walked over one morning to borrow some butter and began to express an opinion about Angela which was caustic but very amusing, so (foolishly and perhaps wrongly, I admit) we showed her our letter and she said how much she wished we would drop it where Angela would find it.’

‘But you did not do so?’

‘Oh, no, of course we didn’t. We all laughed and Marjorie said she’d like it as a souvenir of the holiday, but as we’d forged Esmond’s signature we thought it would hardly do to give the letter away.’

‘So what did you do with it after she had read it?’

‘I put it back into my little writing-case,’ said Winfrith.

‘And Marjorie Parris saw you do that?’

‘I shouldn’t think so. We were outside the caravan by that time, Marjorie and I,’ said Godiva, a little too quickly.

‘But you must have heard later that the letter had been found beside Angela Barton’s body.’

‘It never occurred to us that it was *our* letter. Not until we got back from Scotland and Winfrith had occasion to write another letter, did we realise that our letter had gone. Even then it never occurred to us that it had been used as a suicide note. It was never quoted in the newspapers, you see. We simply thought Winfrith must have dropped our letter somewhere when we packed up to return home, and Angela was dead long before that, so we did not trouble our heads.’

‘I believe they’re a couple of twisters,’ said Laura, on the homeward drive. ‘I never believe people who swear they tell the truth at all times, as you say these claim to do.’

‘I bet they *did* give the letter to Marjorie, if only as a joke,’ said Sally. ‘*And*,’ she added, with emphasis, ‘Nigel Parris is a vet and is allowed to possess strychnine. *And* Angela Barton had made a very nasty crack about him. *And* Angela knew about Marjorie’s affair with Jeremy Tamworth *and* guessed that they spent a week together in Tannasgan while Nigel was at a veterinary conference.’

‘So two and two *do* make five,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘I always suspected that

it might be so. Dear me! What a turn-up for the book, as Laura would say.'

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## CHAPTER 17

### Hubert Pring

‘Unmoved, cold and to temptation slow.’

*William Shakespeare,*



I know little about women,’ said Hubert Pring, ‘and have no desire to know more. I know a great deal, however, about vampires, and, to my mind, Angela Barton was a vampire.’

‘And what, Mr Pring, is your definition of a vampire?’ Dame Beatrice enquired. Hubert assumed his most pontifical air, (‘he really is impossible,’ thought Sally) put the tips of his fingers together and replied, ‘I cannot do better than quote you a short passage from the works of the late Sheridan le Fanu. His remarkable novelette *Carmilla* contains the following passage, and I think you will agree...’

‘I am familiar with *Carmilla*,’ said Dame Beatrice; but Hubert was not to be deterred by pusillanimities of that kind. He waved his hand and proceeded with his recitation.

‘Joseph Sheridan le Fanu, 1814 to 1871,’ he began, ‘was the nephew of the great Irish dramatist Richard Brinsley Sheridan, but, unlike his famous uncle, instead of specialising in the comedy of manners—you will readily call to mind his delightful plays, *The Rivals* and *The School for Scandal*...’

‘Likewise *The Duenna*, his delightful comic opera,’ put in Sally, in naughty imitation of Pring’s lecture-room tones.

‘Quite,’ said Hubert repressively. ‘Joseph, instead, had an urge to write about the dreadful and the macabre. You may remember his *Green Tea*. Well, in *Carmilla*, one of the characters—the narrator, if I remember correctly—has this to say, referring to vampires: “The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons.” ’

‘The vicar,’ muttered Sally, ‘in Vampire Angela’s case.’

‘“In its pursuit of these,”’ went on Hubert, ignoring her, ‘“it will exercise inexhaustible patience and stratagem...” ’

‘Getting itself taken on as housekeeper?’

‘ “...for success to a particular object may be obstructed in a hundred ways.” ’

‘Only two, in Angela’s case: viz. Godiva and Winfrith Benson,’ murmured Sally.

‘ “It will never desist until it has satiated its passion, and drained the very life of its coveted victim.” ’

‘Lucky old Esmond to have escaped the toils!’

‘ “In ordinary ones,” ’ went on Hubert, giving Sally no very friendly glance, ‘ “it goes direct to its object, overpowers with violence, and strangles and exhausts often at a single feast.” I have omitted a short passage which does not affect my argument, for, if that description,’ concluded Hubert Pring, ‘does not give a word-picture of the late but, I fear, unlamented Angela Barton, I’m sure I don’t know what could.’

‘You appear to have been a sufferer, Mr Pring,’ said Dame Beatrice, in a sympathetic voice.

‘You may well say so. It was most unfortunate and, if it all came out, I should not only lose my post but also the chance of buying a partnership in the school, which I shall be in a position to do in two or three years’ time when Parris has finished paying back certain monies he owes me for getting him out of a serious difficulty some months ago. A valuable racing greyhound belonging to a syndicate was stolen from Parris’s kennels and held to ransom for three thousand pounds. Parris could not find three thousand pounds, so appealed to me, as an old schoolfellow, to come to his assistance. Of course I insisted upon a fair rate of interest, to which he agreed. He signed an IOU and I gave him the money. He is paying me back, bit by bit, but sometimes finds it hard, I think, so I keep the tabs on him. After all, it was lucky for him that I was able to help him out. He dared not let the owners know, you see, that the dog had ever been out of his keeping, in case it had been tampered with in some way. You know what goes on at some of these dog-tracks, no doubt.’

‘So that’s what Nigel and Marjorie were talking about,’ said Sally, remembering the day of their quarrel. ‘But what was that about you and Angela Barton? How could she have lost you your job and the chance of a partnership?’

‘Oh, well, as to that—I can rely on you ladies not to let it go any further—it happened like this, and was really not my fault. It chanced that my headmaster was due at some learned society’s annual dinner. He was to be one of the after-dinner speakers, so he could not miss it. His wife, very much younger than



himself, had been invited to a charity ball on the same evening and was very anxious to go, so I was ordered to escort her.

‘Well, I need not go into details, but the fact is that, during the course of the evening, she became completely intoxicated, so much so that I was in a quandary. I dared not take her home in the state she was in. The headmaster might have returned and inevitably would have blamed me for her condition, and, in any case, the servants would have had to know, since I could hardly have been the person to put the wretched woman to bed.’

Sally, visualising such a scene, giggled.

‘The upshot was that I decided to throw myself upon the mercy of Nigel and Marjorie Parris,’ Hubert continued.

‘Was this before or after you came to the Parrises’ rescue?’ Dame Beatrice enquired, quelling Sally with a basilisk eye.

‘As a matter of fact, before. That is why I could hardly refuse Nigel when he appealed to me for help to buy off the greyhound’s kidnappers.’

‘Where should we be without this friendly spirit of give and take?’ said Laura. ‘But how did Angela Barton come to know about your doings when the ball was over and you were faced with your problem?’

‘Oh, because she was a paying guest at Nigel’s at the time, before she went and planted herself first on the Calshotts and then on their vicar,’ Hubert replied.

‘So *that’s* how she knew so much about the Parrises!’ said Sally. ‘I wonder what she found out about the Calshotts while she was at it?—and about the vicar, too, come to that.’

‘But surely it was quite respectable, from your headmaster’s point of view, for his wife to spend the night in a house where there were already two women?’ said Laura.

‘It was her condition, you see,’ explained Hubert, almost pathetically, ‘and Angela could be trusted to make the most of that. If the story ever came out, I should have been blamed, don’t you see? It would be argued that I had betrayed my headmaster’s trust.’

‘I think you exaggerate,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘However, I thank you for your confidences. Now perhaps you would be willing to answer one or two questions. There are certain matters connected with your stay at Tannasgan on which I should wish to receive enlightenment.’

‘My stay at Tannasgan was cut short, of course. Mind you, I did not enjoy it as much as I had hoped I would.’

‘Too many sceptics among the watchers?’

‘I would not have minded their being sceptical. One is prepared for that attitude. What I objected to was their flippant approach.’

‘They jested about the monster?’

‘Worse. They ignored it and went their selfish ways regardless. And let me tell you, Dame Beatrice, that I deplore the term “monster”. The creature, quite obviously, is a deviant from the fusion of two lines or species of prehistoric animals, combining, as it does, the characteristics of *Diplodocus* and/or *Plateosaurus* with those of *Ornithomimus* or *Ornithosuchus*.’

‘You appear to have studied your subject, Mr Pring.’

‘Oh, well, as to that, a couple of talks on prehistoric animals, when examinations are over and end of term approaches, are sure-fire stuff with little boys.’

‘And what causes you to cite those particular prehistoric creatures as the probable ancestors of the animals or reptiles which are said to exist in Scottish lochs?’ asked Dame Beatrice.

Sally groaned inwardly and Laura rolled her eyes ceilingwards, but Dame Beatrice sounded genuinely interested.

‘Lulling him,’ thought Laura, ‘so that, later on, she can get what she wants out of him.’

As though Dame Beatrice’s honeyed words were bait, Hubert Pring rose to them.

‘According to Cox,’ he said, ‘(I refer to Dr Barry Cox, of course, the zoologist and authority on vertebrate palaeontology) the earlier dinosaurs were divided into herbivores and carnivores, the latter succeeding and preying upon the latter. The herbivore, *Diplodocus*, for example, appears to have been amphibious and to have had lakes as his habitat, so that his enormous bulk could be supported by the water. Moreover, his body may have contained large air-sacs, enabling him to sustain himself for long periods without the necessity of surfacing in order to breathe. The humps which so many observers have noted on the Loch Ness creatures could approximate to such air-sacs, could they not? The theory has been advanced, I believe, and seems perfectly credible.’

‘It is a point,’ Dame Beatrice agreed.

‘The reason I suspect a later fusion between the descendants of *Diplodocus* and those of *Ornithomimus*,’ pursued Hubert, his eyes shining with pedagogic enthusiasm, ‘is that the present lake-dwellers are almost certainly fish-eaters, as I remember Sir Humphrey (was it Sir Humphrey?) explaining.’

‘Well,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘your argument is very interesting. All the same,

does not the prehistoric long-necked *Plesiosaurus* coincide in almost all particulars with eye-witnesses' descriptions of the monster? Apart from verbal accounts and such photographs as we have, there is the remarkable sketch made by Mr Torquil MacLeod from a sighting he had in 1960. It looked to me very much like Dr Barry's impression of a long-necked *Plesiosaurus*.'

'Barry's impression doesn't show humps, Dame Beatrice.'

'It was reconstructed from fossilised remains, I suppose, and these would not show air-sacs. *Plesiosaurus*, however, does show paddles in the form of powerful flippers, whereas *Diplodocus* and *Ornithomimus* possessed fore and hind legs, the latter larger and stronger than the former. There is no suggestion of flippers.'

'Angela Barton seems to have possessed a pretty sturdy pair of legs, talking of those,' observed Laura. 'Wasn't she something of a mountaineer?'

'Oh, I think not,' replied Hubert. 'She was a great walker, I believe, and good on hill-slopes, but hardly a mountaineer. That is a very different thing, if you did but know.'

'She did get about, though,' said Sally, forbearing to inform him of Laura's mountaineering exploits.

'I suppose she paid frequent visits to the other caravans,' said Dame Beatrice. Hubert shook his head.

'She was domiciled with the Calshotts,' he said.

'But, in these walks she took, did she not drop in on one or another of you to obtain her lunch? I understood that she never carried provisions with her.'

'She may have visited the major's caravan, but she certainly never dropped in on me.'

'Not even to see Marjorie Parris? She had stayed with the Parrises as a paying guest, you said.'

'Oh, Marjorie was very seldom in our caravan. She did not care for preparing meals. I used to do all that. I'm rather fond of cooking, you know. She would do the tidying up before she went off, and she would wash up after lunch and supper, but most of the day I was alone. Nigel and Jeremy would go off in the boat and I suppose Marjorie joined them as soon as she was free, although nobody ever mentioned it.'

'Did you mind being left alone?'

'Oh, far from it. I prefer to be without distractions when I am engaged upon important work.'

'What work would that be?' asked Laura. 'The cooking do you mean?'

‘Oh, no. I am writing my own book on the monster.’

‘Really? Have you actually seen it?’

‘Oh, yes, two or three times. I have taken photographs, too.’

‘How excited Sir Humphrey must be!’ said Sally.

‘Sir Humphrey?’ said Hubert, blankly. ‘Oh, but my book will be nothing to do with him.’

‘It was he who organised the expedition and paid for everything.’

‘That will be acknowledged in my preface.’

‘Has he seen your photographs?’

‘Nobody except my publishers and the printers will see those until my book comes out.’

‘So it was your idea to change over caravans, I suppose.’

‘Yes. I put it to the others that it would be agreeable to obtain a different view-point. They concurred, so I took it upon myself to communicate our ideas to the major. He was more than ready to make the exchange, especially when I threw in my bottle of sparkling burgundy as an inducement, and so it all came about.’

‘Just like that!’ said Sally.

‘Just like that,’ agreed Hubert, looking slightly surprised. There was something in her tone which had disconcerted him. He would have been even more disconcerted had he overheard the first remark she made to Laura when they had left him and were in Dame Beatrice’s car and were headed for the New Forest and the Stone House.

‘The dirty little bastard!’ Sally said.

‘You mean his book?’ asked Laura.

‘Yes, I do. It was fully understood that any sightings and particularly any photographs were to be reported and shown to Sir Humphrey, and here’s this little worm double-crossing everybody in his slimy, underhand, secretive little way. I wish Angela Barton *had* told his headmaster that Mrs Headmaster had spent the night canned to the eyebrows in Hubert Pring’s digs.’

‘They were no longer his digs, presumably, and there were already two women on the premises,’ Laura pointed out ‘It was all as respectable as dammit, damn it.’

‘Not the way Angela Barton would have told the story,’ said Sally.

‘The fact remains that she did not tell it,’ said Dame Beatrice from the back seat of the car, for Laura was driving with

Sally seated beside her. ‘I think, Laura, that we had better turn off at the next

crossroads. The morning is not yet spent and I wish to interview the Benson sisters once more.'

'You'll find them at the vicarage cooking the vicar's lunch, I expect,' said Sally. 'Phyllis told me that Godiva is a *cordon bleu* and Winfrith a trained dietician. I can't imagine why the vicar ever gave a thought to Angela Barton when he had the twins at his beck and call.'

'I expect it was Angela who did the thinking,' said Laura. 'Anyway, what's the matter with having our own lunch before we hit the Benson trail?' As by this time it was almost noon, for they had left the Stone House soon after breakfast, Laura's suggestion was well received and, after an expensive but satisfying meal at an hotel which they reached at just after one o'clock, they drove to the Bensons' cottage and were fortunate enough to find the sisters at home.

'We have just come from Mr Pring,' said Dame Beatrice, who had left Laura and Sally in the car. 'I am very sorry to trouble you again and so soon, but there are two things I think you can tell me, if you will.'

'About Angela Barton's death? You think she was murdered, and so do I. Winfrith demurs, but that is only chicken-heartedness. I don't know why one uses that term,' said Godiva, breaking off in order to give consideration to this point. 'There is nothing so evil and unforgiving and unutterably vindictive as a hen. But you were saying?'

'Only this: did you and your sister enjoy the sparkling burgundy provided by Sir Humphrey?'

'We had no opportunity of enjoying it. The major classed it contemptuously as hogwash and stated that there was only one bubbly and that was champers. I have no idea what he meant. Anyhow, he said that he should take the bottles home, as they would do for his guests.'

'But could not you and your sister have claimed one of the bottles, leaving Major Tamworth and his wife the other?'

'Our only interest in alcoholic beverages is their use in cooking. Sparkling burgundy has no place in the preparation of our menus.'

'I see. The other caravans appear to have enjoyed Sir Humphrey's gift.'

'He gave three bottles to Nigel Parris.'

'Three?'

'Yes. He said that two bottles to be shared by three young men and a girl were insufficient. Hubert claimed one of the bottles and traded it to the major, who tried the wine and condemned it and said he should take the other two bottles home to offer to his guests, as I told you.'

‘How do you come to know this?’

‘Marjorie Parris told us. Now and again, especially during the first few days of our stay, she came over to our caravan while the major and Mrs Tamworth had the tent. She said she could not bear the exclusive company of Hubert Pring.’

‘She only came over in the mornings after that,’ said Winfrith. Her strong-minded sister frowned.

‘I am afraid she was occupied during the afternoons in misbehaving herself with the major,’ she said.

‘Misbehaving herself with the major?’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘Marjorie Parris and Major Tamworth would have nothing but mutual misbehaviour in common,’ snapped Godiva. ‘Both were bored to death with the life they led on the banks of the loch. Of course the major had nothing to fear, but with a jealous husband like Nigel—well, *I* don’t know about Marjorie. I think she was running risks.’

‘But how do you come to know this?’

Godiva raised her eyebrows.

‘Angela Barton told us, of course,’ she said. ‘How else could we have known? *We* do not spy upon unlawful couplings!’

‘Like father, like son,’ said Dame Beatrice absently. ‘Did Angela Barton often visit your caravan?’

‘Oh, yes, frequently she would drop in for a snack. She never carried food with her. It was her custom, I believe, to have a substantial breakfast and then, round about five o’clock, after the major and Mrs Tamworth had had their tea and gone off again, she would drop in and take pot-luck. I think she appreciated our cooking. I expect it compared favourably with Lady Calshott’s efforts.’

‘So by tea-time the major had ceased to sport with Amaryllis in the shade,’ commented Dame Beatrice.

‘He would not miss his tea, and Marjorie, I dare say, would hardly *dare* to miss hers, for fear of questions being asked.’

‘But what about Mrs Tamworth? Did she not wonder why the major did not spend his afternoons with her?’

‘I expect she was usually asleep, and, of course, I don’t suppose he spent *every* afternoon with Marjorie. In any case, Mrs Tamworth, poor woman, would have been glad of a respite from his company, I daresay. He was a most overbearing man, I always thought. She had not the very faintest idea of how to manage him.’

‘*You* appear to have managed him with considerable success, I understand.  
How did you do it?’

‘Oh, bullies are not always as brave as they would have one think, and *I* was not his wife.’

‘Perhaps you had the whip hand over his food.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Godiva. ‘Show me a man and I will show you a pig’

‘You malign the porcine race.’

‘Yes,’ said Godiva, with a harsh laugh, ‘perhaps I do, when I compare it with Major Tamworth.’

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## CHAPTER 18

### Sparkling Burgundy

‘Sad purple well! whose bubbling eye  
Did first against a murderer cry;  
Whose streams, still vocal, did complain  
Of bloody Cain.’

*Henry Vaughan, Silurist.*



**S**o that accounts for the bottle which Laura found at the hunting-lodge,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘It doesn’t account for who put poison in it and hid it in a barrel,’ said Sally.

‘Did the autopsy indicate whether Angela Barton had drunk any of the coffee?’ asked Laura. ‘We’ve nothing to go on in assuming that she’d been given poisoned wine. And where did the thermos flask come from? Was that ever established?’

‘Oh, there’s no secret about that,’ said Sally. ‘It belonged to Lady Calshott. That’s another reason why the Scottish police didn’t bother with it. They assumed—and nobody could contradict them—that Angela had simply borrowed it without asking. After all, she was one of Sir Humphrey’s party and a near relation to Lady Calshott.’

‘Did Lady Calshott admit that the flask was hers?’

‘I suppose so. I think she must have done, as the police made no fuss about it.’

‘We had better make certain,’ said Dame Beatrice, as she went to the telephone. A long call to Sir Humphrey’s house disposed of the matter to some extent. The flask which had contained the poisoned coffee was Lady Calshott’s property. Angela Barton knew where it was kept and there was no reason why Angela should not have borrowed it.

‘The only thing is,’ said Lady Calshott over the telephone, ‘that, if Angela borrowed one of my flasks, it could only have been to lend it to somebody else. I told the police at the time, and I still hold to it, Dame Beatrice, that under no



circumstances would Angela have burdened herself with a thermos flask of coffee when she was taking one of her walks. I stressed this, but the Scottish inspector, although in the most courteous way, adhered to his theory that, on this occasion, I happened to be wrong; that Angela had set out that morning with suicide in mind; that she had made two attempts to kill herself, as was evidenced by the wound in her throat and the attempt she had made to drown herself and that, in a last desperate effort, she had had recourse to the poison.'

'And you found his arguments difficult to refute, no doubt.'

'In the end, I found them impossible to refute, especially in view of the letter which was found beside the body.'

'It's a tough one,' said Laura, when Dame Beatrice reported the conversation, 'because if anybody *did* borrow that thermos flask, they're not going to say so, are they?'

'Of course,' said Sally, 'looked at in the broadest sense, I suppose Angela did commit suicide, didn't she?'

'Am I right in thinking that there spoke your father's daughter?' asked Dame Beatrice. 'It seems to me that, long years of my son's professional life having been spent in defending scoundrels against their just deserts, something of his mentality may have been inherited by his daughter.'

'You may save your jibes, Grandmamma. I mean exactly what I say. If a person is so bitchy and backbiting as to invite murder, I say that that person is a potential suicide. Angela Barton *must* have known that you can't keep threatening all of the people all of the time without running the most appalling risks. In my opinion, she was shouting out for one of her victims to kill her.'

'She never actually blackmailed anybody, did she?' asked Laura.

'There's such a thing as moral blackmail, isn't there?' demanded Sally.

'Lady Calshott told me one other thing over the telephone,' said Dame Beatrice. 'Miss Barton's will has been proved. She left all that she had to the vicar. I ventured to ask whether the Calshotts were surprised, and Lady Calshott assured me that they were not surprised at all. Sir Humphrey had warned her and Phyllis that something of the sort was to be expected, but that he thought there might be grounds for contesting the will if what he imagined turned out to be true.'

'And it *has* turned out to be true. Will they put up a fight?' asked Laura.

'No.'

'That's odd,' said Sally. 'I should have thought Lady Calshott would have battled like hell for Phyllis's inheritance. It was quite understood, at one time,

that all of Angela's money was to go to Phyllis, you know.'

'Phyllis will not be deprived entirely of it.'

'The vicar is prepared to brass up?'

'No, he is prepared to marry Phyllis.'

'Good Lord! Then what about the Bensons?'

'They are to obtain what, in any case, has been the summit of their desires. They are to live at the vicarage as joint housekeepers and are to have the sole right to the room with the north light for a studio. But we digress.'

'As the bishop said to the cardinal when they set out to discuss birth control and ended up talking about the doping of racing-greyhounds,' said Laura, 'and *that* brings us back to the point at issue. Who killed Angela Barton? You know, I think we ought to take a long, hard look at Hubert Pring. His motive wouldn't impress many people, it's true, but there's no doubt he's scared stiff that somebody might leak it to his headmaster that he allowed that stupid young woman to get sloshed at the ball so that he dared not take her home until he'd got her sobered up. If he thought Angela Barton intended to spill the beans, there's no knowing what he might have done.'

'Yes,' Dame Beatrice agreed, 'but the fact remains that Angela Barton never did spill the beans as you term it, to anybody who mattered.'

'But she held the sword of Damocles over her victims' heads,' said Sally, 'and if that isn't mental cruelty I don't know what is. I'd have had a go at her myself if she'd ever got anything on *me*.'

'Hubert Pring wasn't the only one of the party who must have wished Angela Barton was dead,' said Laura. 'If you ask me, this case bristles with motives.'

'Like the major's moustache,' said Sally. 'All the same, the major seems the only person who *didn't* have a motive. I've no doubt he fooled about with Marjorie Parris, but whereas she had a jealous husband, the major had nothing to fear from his doormat of a wife. I expect she was glad to get a few afternoons to herself, if the truth were known.'

'Motives?' said Dame Beatrice. 'It will be interesting to assess them, and Sally, who knows the protagonists much more closely than I do, shall give us the benefit of her deductions.'

'I regard that as a challenge, Grandmamma, and as there is nobody who can make me look a fool more kindly than you can, I shall attempt to rise to the occasion,' said Sally. 'Right, then! Now I don't think we can wash out the Calshotts. They knew Angela was setting her cap at the vicar and they also knew—or thought they knew—that she had made her will in favour of their daughter

Phyllis. Moreover, the thermos flask came from Lady Calshott and, so far, we don't know whether it was the poisoned coffee or the poisoned wine which killed Angela.'

'A very fair assessment,' said Dame Beatrice. 'Let us examine it. So far as motive is concerned, I give it high marks. Unfortunately, motive is, in law, a subsidiary consideration which has to give way in importance to means and opportunity.'

'Well, I fall down there, Grandmamma. The thermos flask undoubtedly belonged to Lady Calshott, but there's nothing to show whose bottle it was which contained the poisoned wine. I'd be inclined to think it was Hubert Pring's bottle, and Hubert, so far as I can see, adds up on all three counts. He certainly thought he had a motive, and, with his two-by-four outlook on life, I should say it was a powerful one. Also he could have got hold of the strychnine.'

'How do you make that out?' asked Laura. 'I know he had stayed with the Parrises, and all that, but no responsible doctor or vet is going to leave his poisons cupboard open so that any casual murderer can get his hands on a lethal dose. I bet, wherever the strychnine came from, it wasn't from Nigel Parris's stock. Anyway, what about opportunity to administer the poison?'

'Simple. When I last saw Angela alive, she was walking towards the head of the loch. Before she got to it she must have changed her mind and decided to drop in on the Bensons.'

'Yes, but one thing puzzles me about that. It seems that she was always dropping in on the Bensons, yet I thought they hated her guts.'

'Yes, but she didn't hate theirs. Once she'd landed that housekeeping job at the vicarage, she thought she had put one over on them and spiked their guns...'

'And she did appreciate their cooking,' said Dame Beatrice.

'I should have thought, all the same, they would have shown her the door,' said Laura.

'People like the Benson sisters don't show people the door,' said Sally.

'Whatever their private feelings about Angela, she was *persona grata* at the vicarage and so, to a certain extent, were they. They knew jolly well, I take it, that if there was an open breach between her and them, she would see to it that the vicar was out when they called, whether that was really the case or not. To resume: after I had seen her go off, I think she turned round and called at the middle caravan, forgetting that she was not calling on the Bensons, for, of course, the major and Nigel had swapped caravans. What she found must have been Hubert Pring on his own, Marjorie having deserted him as usual, and Nigel

and Jeremy having gone off on their own, also as usual, to keep Jeremy and Marjorie apart.'

'Would Angela have forgotten quite so soon that the caravans had been swopped over?'

'That is how I see it. What else is there to think?'

'And pretty plausible, too,' commented Laura. 'So Hubert, who has somehow contrived (for the sake of the argument, although I don't believe a word of it) to possess himself of the strychnine from Nigel's store, invites Angela to come ben, uncorks the burgundy, they take pot-luck together and Angela gets a dose of poison. But how does she get to the crofter's cottage? Why is she soaking wet? Why has she a nasty gash in her throat?'

'I suppose Hubert took her across.'

'With the other party in control of the boat? With the lunch to prepare? He did all the cooking for that particular party, we have to remember,' put in Dame Beatrice.

'Yes, I see what you mean,' said Sally. 'Well, let me try again. Jeremy I leave right out of it. It's only speculation that he spent the best part of a week with Marjorie while Nigel was at the conference. He wouldn't care who knew it, anyway. He's like that, and, besides, Angela wouldn't have been able to prove anything.'

'Mrs McLauchlin? Although Jeremy had rented a cottage, I expect they went to the pub for drinks,' said Laura. She shook her head before Sally could answer. 'No, I can't see that cheery, open-hearted soul going into a huddle with Angela Barton to disclose an irregular little affair. Sorry! I believe I interrupted you.'

'Well, next on the list are Marjorie and Nigel, I suppose. Either, especially Nigel, could have provided the strychnine. Angela was known to spread rumours of a particularly unpleasant kind about Nigel. She even tried them out on me.'

'I think she would have lain herself open to prosecution had she dared to attempt to harm the young man publicly,' said Dame Beatrice. 'Mrs Parris, because of her indiscretions, is a far more likely suspect, in my opinion. She was reckless, undisciplined, not (so far as I could determine on an admittedly brief acquaintanceship) either particularly scrupulous or particularly intelligent. Moreover, except for her husband, she was in the best position of all the party to have access to the poison. She may even have acted as his dispenser. I believe they were not well off and, with Hubert Pring to repay, Nigel Parris probably did without hired help wherever he possibly could. What we must establish, before we go much further, is whether Nigel had taken any strychnine with him to

Tannasgan or whether somebody had got hold of it before the expedition was arranged, had murder in mind and only needed the opportunity to commit it.'

'So we chalk up Marjorie as a probable suspect, more probable than anyone else, so far, you think,' said Sally.

'I see her as an accessory before the fact,' said Dame Beatrice, 'and I am not at all sure that she was aware of this. She may even be in some danger if it ever occurs to her that she assisted in a case of murder. Owing to her volatile nature and her lack of intelligence, it may take some time for her to put two and two together...'

'And make five?' asked Sally, putting out her tongue at her grandmother.

'Maybe,' Dame Beatrice equably replied. 'Remember that Gilbert Keith Chesterton once told us that it is only the last and wildest kind of courage which will stand on a hilltop before ten thousand people and tell them that twice two are four.'

'But if you take away all the other suspects, that only leaves the major,' said Laura.

'And that's the one person who hasn't the shadow of a motive,' said Sally.

'From what I've gathered, he adds up from the point of view of character.'

'How do you mean?'

'A bully and a bit of a coward, stupid, arrogant and selfish,' said Laura.

'Plenty of men are all those things, but they don't commit murder.'

'Only because they've never been tempted. Wonder what Mrs Croc is talking about on the telephone all this time? She's been out there for nearly half an hour.'

'Talking of the major,' said Sally, after a pause, 'he'd be my choice, too, if only he had the shadow of a motive. What I don't like is the blithe way he produced those two unopened bottles of sparkling burgundy when he was asked to account for them.'

'I thought he said they'd do for his guests.'

'Yes, I know, but when we were talking things over with Grandmamma she gave me the impression that the major rather *expected* to be asked to account for those bottles.'

'Well, you'd expect him to expect it, wouldn't you? Oh, no, though! I see what you mean. Everybody except us still thought that it was poisoned coffee, not poisoned wine, which Angela had taken. Still, it hasn't been proved either way, and never will be, now. Well, apart from that, there doesn't seem much doubt that Angela borrowed the thermos flask (purloined it, is perhaps a better

word) but it must have been to lend it to somebody else. The question is, to whom?’

‘That’s an easy one, I think. By far the likeliest person to want a thermos flask was Mrs Tamworth. You remember how Godiva Benson banished her and the major to the tent? What more likely than that she should have wanted a thermos flask to take to the tent for the elevenses?’

‘But that brings Mrs Tamworth into it and I can’t—I really *can’t*—see her planning a murder.’

‘Oh, I don’t think she did,’ said Dame Beatrice, coming into the room. ‘I’ve been on the telephone to her. She admits that she asked for and obtained the thermos flask, as she thought it would be useful in the tent. She added a further and more interesting item of information. The major has gone monster-hunting again at Tannasgan.’

‘Whatever for?’ cried Sally. ‘He openly scoffs at the monster.’

‘May be getting cold feet, owing to the enquiries we’ve been making,’ said Laura, ‘and has gone back to make sure he’s left no trace, although trace of *what* is anybody’s guess.’

‘Well, it does seem a strange move for him to make,’ said Sally. ‘Why, oh, why hadn’t he got a motive for killing Angela Barton? If he had, he’d be the perfect choice for a murderer. His wife even borrowed that flask which held the coffee, and he *was* being a bit of a tom-cat with Marjorie Parris, apparently.’

‘He had quite a powerful motive,’ asserted Dame Beatrice.

‘You mean because Angela knew of the goings-on with Marjorie? She did once call him an old goat in my hearing, so presumably she did know, but I thought we’d agreed that it was Marjorie, not the major, who had something to fear if things leaked out about that liaison.’

‘I have also been talking to Godiva Benson,’ said Dame Beatrice, appearing to go off at a tangent. ‘You will remember that she and her sister had charge of the boat on the day of Miss Barton’s death. Her story is that there was another disturbance in the loch that morning.’

‘While I was cruising about in my van to find a road which led to the hunting-lodge?’

‘So I should imagine. The twin sisters were about to embark when the surface of the loch was disturbed and so they put off their trip for about an hour. During that hour I think Angela Barton was murdered.’

‘By the major?’

‘He is of stout and powerful build. It would not be difficult for him to

overcome an unsuspecting little woman and force the poisoned wine down her throat. He had only to follow her on her lonely walk and seize his opportunity. Then came the boat, with her lying hidden in the bottom of it, the body carried up to the cottage, the already prepared evidence of suicide planted. After that, he merely had to return to the caravan after what purported to be an hour's fishing and leave the boat for the Bensons.'

'And he had already left the wine bottle in one of the casks up at the hunting-lodge where, given a bit of luck, it would never be found or, if it *was* found, would seem to have no importance?' said Laura.

'I still don't see what motive he had,' said Sally.

'Do you not remember that at Phyllis Calshott's birthday dinner he let fall the information that he was standing for Parliament? Surely, after the embarrassing disclosures which have been made in comparatively recent years, no prospective candidate for a position in public life could afford to have the affair with Marjorie Parris come out?'

'There's no proof of all this,' said Laura, 'unless the major confesses, and I can't see him doing that. Besides, how on earth could he have persuaded Marjorie Parris to let him have the strychnine?'

'I thought we knew that,' said Sally. 'Don't you remember that people use it for getting rid of moles? I suppose Angela was a bit of a mole, you know, tunnelling and burrowing away in the dark and raising little heaps of dirt all over the place, so he got Marjorie to sneak him a dose on the excuse that he had moles on his lawn.'

'Even moles do not deserve to die of strychnine poisoning,' said Dame Beatrice.

'And the body must have fallen into the water when he was lifting it out of the boat, and he gaffed it to pull it ashore? That must be true, so now what do we do?'

'I have telephoned Laura's husband, our dear Robert. He will take charge of the analyst's report on the wine bottle and will accompany us to Glasgow, where he will talk to the chief of police. After that, I have no doubt that we shall all go on to Tannasgan to find out what the major has to say for himself. Of course, he planned the murder as soon as he heard about Tannasgan. That is why he joined the expedition. His affair with Marjorie must have begun before the Tannasg monster was ever thought of, and Angela, who knew everything, knew that.'

'And Marjorie still went to Tannasgan with Jeremy,' said Laura. 'Well, what do you know!'

‘That Angela was one kind of bitch and Marjorie was another,’ said Sally.



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## CHAPTER 19

### Leviathan Speaks

‘No more? A monster then, a dream...’

*Alfred, Lord Tennyson.*



In spite of Laura’s distrust of aeroplanes, the party of four flew to Glasgow where the three women went straight to the hotel at which Dame Beatrice and Laura had stayed on their previous visit. Assistant Commissioner Robert Gavin joined them for dinner after he had paid a friendly, strictly unofficial visit to the chief of police in the city.

‘Sympathy, but no dice,’ he said later, when the four of them were seated in the lounge. ‘They found your arguments interesting, but indicated that there would have to be far firmer evidence of murder before they would be prepared to change the verdict of suicide.’

‘What more do they want?’ demanded Laura. ‘We can present them with poisoned wine, a forged letter, evidence of means, motive and opportunity...’

‘I know. Oh, they’ll take another look at it all, never fear, but naturally they’re cautious. Never mind. We’ll all go and take a look at Loch na Tannasg tomorrow morning. We might see the monster, even if we don’t catch up with the major, although I must say I should rather like a word with him, although I couldn’t act on it officially. Not my job any more to track down murderers and I should be poaching, anyway, if I did it up here without invitation,’ said her husband.

Early on the following morning he hired a car and the party drove to the inn at Tannasgan.

‘Major Tamworth is it?’ said Mrs McLauchlin. ‘Och, aye, he’ll be hereabouts. Booked in last night verra late. Couldna get a flight, he said, so he had tae come by the train. He was like something dementit the morn, and awa’ tae the loch. Tellt us he was for a day’s fushin’ and speired at whit way he might be getting a boatie. I tellt him the boat Sir Humphrey had wis still there, so off he ganged. Na, na, he hadna a caur. The caur which brocht him frae Glesca wis tae

come for him the morn's morn.'

'Thanks,' said Laura, who had been making the enquiries. 'You look after Sally, Gavin, and I'll take Mrs Croc. If the major has a guilty conscience, he may turn nasty, so we'd better divvy up the muscle men if we're going to cover both sides of the loch.'

'You'd better take the car, then,' said Sally. 'You know the way to the hunting-lodge, don't you? We'll walk along the south bank as far as the pine-wood. It's about the only place where he can beach the boat.'

'Then I think we'll all take the car as far as it will go along the south bank, and wait for him,' said Gavin. 'He'll have to come back that way if he hasn't a car.'

They did not get a sight of the boat and its occupant until they had almost reached the pine-wood. Even then, the boat was not the first thing that they noticed. Far over on the north side of the loch the surface began to boil and churn. Then a broad wake, fish-tailing out in foam, turned the hitherto quiet water to a maelstrom on which they saw that a boat was tossing like a cork. Sally, who had binoculars, cried out, 'Good gracious, there he is!'

There was no question of an attempt at rescue. The boat was too far off. Laura, indeed, kicked off her shoes, but Gavin gripped her so tightly that even the Amazonian Laura could not break free.

'No use, love,' he said in her ear. Neither was it of any use. The maelstrom did not cease nor the foaming water diminish its fury until there could be no hope for the occupant of the boat. At last there was nothing to see but the boat floating upside down, a distant scurry of foam and, a little ahead of that, a darkish, small object which might have been the head of an aquatic animal.

'Well,' said Gavin, 'I'm afraid there's nothing to do but to get back and tell the police what's happened. I suppose they'll recover the body sooner or later.'

Suddenly, from the seaward end of the loch where the fishtail of foam was now fast disappearing, there came a peculiar crying. It could have been a baying of hounds or possibly a lowing of cattle. It reverberated strangely among the impassive mountains like an angry, negative reply.

The body was never recovered.

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